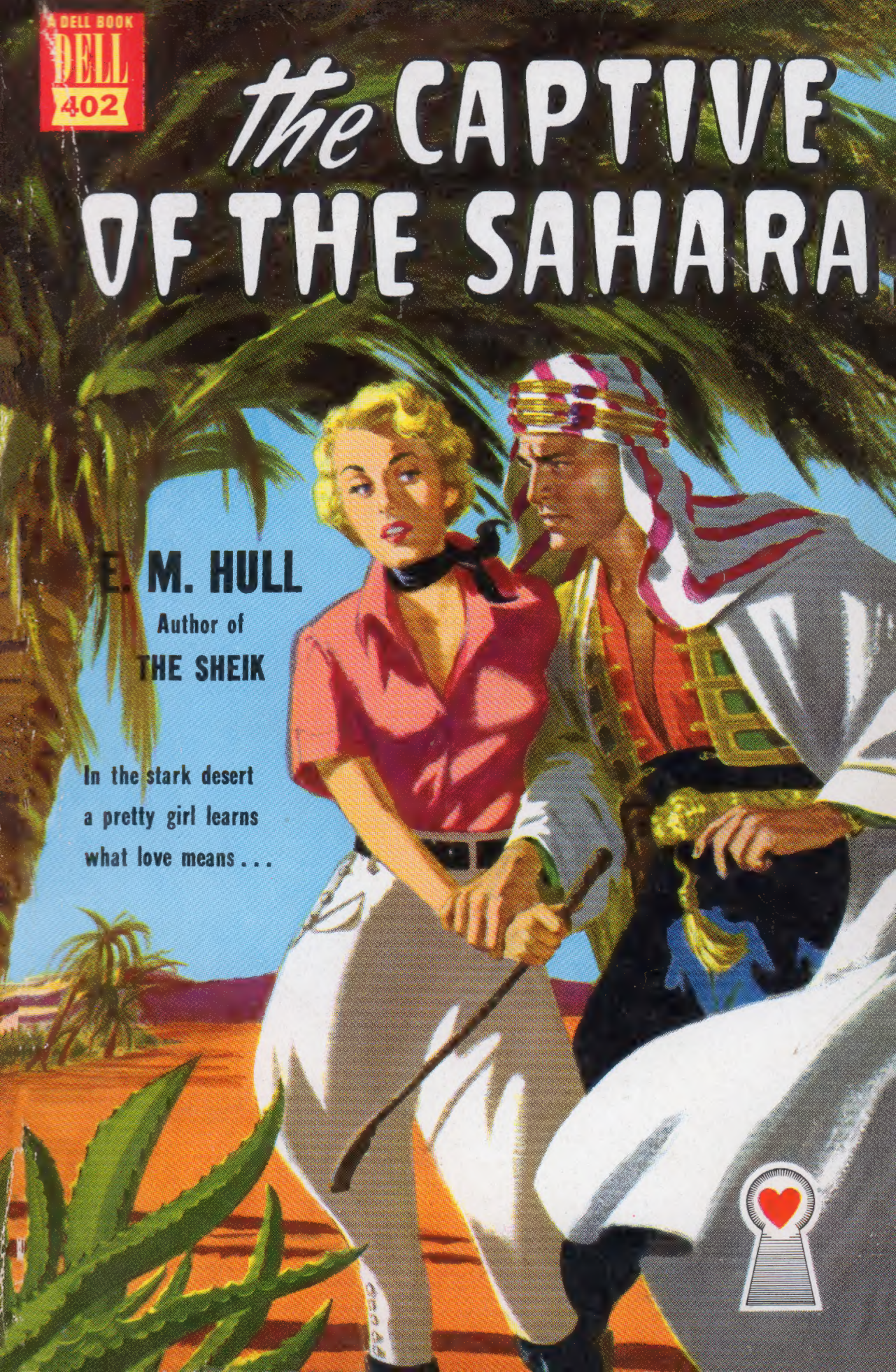
A DELL BOOK

DELL 402

the CAPTIVE OF THE SAHARA



E. M. HULL

Author of

THE SHEIK

In the stark desert
a pretty girl learns
what love means . . .

THE CAPTIVE OF THE SAHARA

Persons this *Love Story* is about—

ISMA CRICHTON,
lovely, sensitive, but unhappy and alone, loathes the idea of marriage to any man. Frantically wishing to avoid the marriage with David Arne that all but herself seem to think inevitable, she jumps at the opportunity to travel to the Sahara — and undreamed of adventure.

DAVID ARNE,
big, stalwart, with rugged good looks, has loved Isma from the days of their childhood together. He has been quietly waiting for Isma to grow old enough to marry him, and now he is both alarmed and troubled by the great change in her.

SAÏD BEN AISSA,
a slender but enormously strong Arab chieftain with an intense but quiet dignity and tragic, melancholy eyes, falls in love with Isma before he meets her and desires her with all the fiery ardor of his passionate nature.

ALCIBIADES B. (THE SAGAMORE) HOYT,
whose archeological work seems to be a blind covering some very different, mysterious purpose, is an American. He gets his nickname because of his Indian blood.

MESSAOUDA,
a beautiful Arab woman, educated, like her brother Saïd, in America, is the real driving force of the tribe. She is determined, heart and soul, to avenge the tragedy that changed her from a laughing girl into a heartbroken woman.

ISHAK-EL-AKHAR,
Saïd's cousin, has an insolent manner and furtive eyes in a handsome, hawklike face. Although the love affairs of Ishak are as the stars in number, he has but one very real passion, Saïd's sister Messaouda.

SIR MICHAEL ARNE,
David's handsome, charming father, is aging rapidly. His one wish is to see David, who is the pivot of his existence, married to Isma Crichton.

LADY MERSTON,
Sir Michael's dogmatic cousin, treats Isma with a proprietary fussiness that convinces all, including Isma, that she intends to see them married.

FATIMA,
Isma's maid-servant, intelligent and loyal, has more than a few juicy tidbits of gossip at her tongue's tip.

THE CAPTIVE OF THE SAHARA

What this *Love Story* is about—

Isma Crichton, proud and willful English beauty, faces a crisis in her life as the captive of the ruler of the City of Stones, the slender, tragic-eyed Sidi Saïd. Amid the stark realities of life in the desert, Isma learns the real meaning of love.

Before she can learn the secrets of her own heart, however, Isma learns the secrets of others; of the man who has loved her from childhood, strong, virile David Arne, whose balanced mind has difficulty in controlling the impulses of his powerful body; of the unhappy Messaouda, who tries to keep veiled from the world the tragedy reflected in her dark eyes; and of Alcibiades Hoyt who is torn by the strength of his unrequited love for Messaouda. But she is to learn the real meaning of love from Sidi Saïd.

This vivid story of fear and daring, of love and hate on the Sahara, woven with spellbinding artistry and building to an intensely dramatic climax, is written by the author of many famous desert tales, among them *The Sheik* and *Sons of the Sheik*.

FLAMING LOVE IN THE STARK DESERT

THE CAPTIVE OF THE SAHARA

By E. M. HULL

Author of
"The Sheik"
"Sons of the Sheik"

COVER PAINTING BY HARRY BENNETT

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The Captive of the Sahara

Chapter One: AFRAID OF LOVE

"DAVID, for heaven's sake—stop playing that brutal thing. I can't bear it. It gets on my nerves."

The vehement utterance rose sharply above the haunting refrain that was filling the room with strange heartbreaking melody; and, dropping his hands from the keyboard, David Arne turned to look, half frowningly, half anxiously, at the girl who sat huddled on the low fender seat, staring into the fire with weariness and dejection showing in every line of her slight drooping figure. Both attitude and tone were unfamiliar to him; and, beneath the golden brown mustache that scarcely hid them, his firm lips tightened as he closed the piano and, going to her, stood for a moment looking down on the bent brown head before he lowered his long length into the armchair against which she was leaning.

"Nerves, Isma?" he said incredulously. "Since when have you developed nerves?"

She only shrugged her shoulders; and, content, apparently, to let the question go, with the privileged assurance of an old friend, he searched in his pockets for a pipe which he slowly filled and lit. And for some time, making no further effort at conversation, he sat watching her closely through the wreathing spirals of tobacco smoke.

The sound of a smothered sigh made him lean forward at last, and, putting a hand under her chin, he turned her face up to his. It was a lovely little face, at once sensitive and determined, with clear-cut regular features, and character showing in the small mouth that could set obstinately in spite of its delicate curves. But the soft rounded cheeks he had always known tinged with healthy color were today deathly pale, and under the big dark blue eyes, usually so clear but now dull and tired looking,

were heavy black circles that made them seem bigger and darker than they really were.

"What time did you get to bed—this morning?" There was more peremptoriness in his tone than he knew; and, already restless under his stare, she jerked her head free.

"That's my business," she said shortly.

"It'll be a doctor's business if you're not careful," he retorted. "When I came up to see you last month you were looking like nothing on earth, and I've been worrying ever since. That's why I'm here today. And today you look like a ghost. It's no good hedging, Isma. Out with it. What was the ungodly hour?"

Her chin went up indignantly.

"You haven't the remotest right to ask," she flashed, "but if it's of any interest to you to know—it was about nine. *Now* are you satisfied?"

Arne bent down to knock his pipe out with unnecessary force on the hearth.

"Yes," he said grimly, "satisfied that Lady Brough is an even bigger fool than I thought she was."

"That's impossible. But I wasn't with Mary Brough last night." There was something in her voice that made Arne turn swiftly to her again.

"Look here, Isma—" he began, but she cut him short.

"Now, David, that's not allowed." And she wagged an admonishing forefinger at him. "There was to be no more barging into my affairs. I told you that the last time you came up. You're not going to have me out on the mat because I don't always go trailing at Mary's heels. She's paid, and jolly well paid, to cart me about to functions—if I want her. But you know Daddy left me absolutely free to do as I like, in everything."

"He didn't know you were going to live in London."

"He knew I was going to be alone, wherever I lived. So that's that, and quite enough about me. What's your news? You're looking very fit. How's Sir Michael?"

Arne shook his head, his grave face growing graver; and he got up to stand with his back to the fire, his hands plunged deep in his coat pockets.

"Not too well, lately," he said slowly, "and his eyes have been bothering him again. I've been trying to get him to see a specialist. But you know what an old Spartan he is. He only laughs at me. I'm not happy about him, and I don't like leaving him alone. That's why I can only stay a few hours. I must get back tonight."

To Isma Crichton, who knew the great love that existed between Sir Michael Arne and his son, the short jerky sentences conveyed a feeling of deeper anxiety than the actual words expressed, and distress was mingled with reproach in the little cry that broke from her:

"Oh, David, you shouldn't have come."

"I had to come. I'd have come sooner if I could have left the Governor. But he's been better the last few days, so I shot up for an hour or two to—to have a straight talk with you, Isma. It was something in your last letter. Nothing you actually said, but something I seemed to read between the lines. I got an idea things weren't going well, that you were up against it, somehow—and it's worried me, infernally. I thought if I could see you perhaps you'd tell me, let me—help, if there was any trouble. And there is trouble. I saw that plainly enough the moment I came into the room this afternoon. Perhaps you'll say it isn't my business, as you did last month. But it *is* my business. What touches you, touches me. You've known that all your life. And I promised the Colonel I'd always stand by, always help in any way I could—if you ever needed me. Can't I help now? Can't you tell me what the trouble is? It doesn't matter what you say to me; it never has mattered. You've always trusted me, always told me things, ever since you were old enough to speak at all. Why can't you speak freely now, as you used to? Don't you trust me any longer? Sometimes it seems to me as if you don't, for all this last year you've been different, you've been trying to keep me at arm's length. You've changed—a lot. But I haven't changed. I'm just—what I always was."

Once or twice while he was speaking her lips had parted as if interruption was imminent, but she heard him out in silence, and for a moment or two longer kept silent,

frowning thoughtfully at the fire.

"No," she agreed, at length, "you've never changed. Not even the War could change you. You're too honest, too steadfast, ever to change. I suppose it's because you're so strong, so sure of yourself. You make up your mind, and stick to it. That's why people always trust you."

"Then why can't you trust me?"

"I do trust you, both you and Sir Michael. But everything's different now. I'm not a child any longer, David. You always seem to forget, as Daddy forgot, that I grew up during the War. I've got to stand on my own feet now, fight my own battles and settle my own difficulties."

Arne dropped one hand on the shoulder nearest to him.

"That's all very well, up to a point," he said gruffly. "I'm not doubting your ability to stand on your own feet, and God knows I don't want to interfere in your affairs, but when it is a question of your happiness—I can't stand aside and say nothing. For heaven's sake, child, forget for a moment you're grown up. Tell me what the trouble is."

"Isn't it enough that I've lost Daddy?" she answered unsteadily. "I can't get used to it. It hurts more now than it did even at first. You know what he was to me—father and mother in one—just everything. And everything I ever cared about seems to have gone with him. We hadn't a thought that wasn't the other's. There was only one mind between us. And now, now—oh, David, why did there have to be a War? Why did Daddy have to be taken from me? To go through from the beginning without a scratch —and then, at the last minute, only an hour before the finish"— she paused for an instant, teeth clenched on trembling lip—"and after that—those two awful years—a helpless cripple, *Daddy,* who was always so strong, so *young.* When he died last year the best of me seemed to die too. It's left me hard, and bitter—and hateful. I've never been able to speak of it before, never wanted to speak of it, even to you, and you cared for him almost as much as I did. I want to forget. All the time I'm trying to forget. That's why I'm here, in London, dancing all night —and coming in with the milk every morning," she ended,

with a sharp almost defiant little laugh that brought a smothered oath to Arne's lips.

"Give it up," he burst out. "It's a rotten life. You don't like it. You can't make me believe you like it. You haven't one interest in common with this set of cocktail-drinking, bridge, and dancing maniacs you've mixed yourself up with. Bright Young Things, are they? My God! Girls who play at being boys, and boys who look like girls—slack-backed, unsexed decadents, the lot of them, with minds like sewers. They're not your sort, and never will be. You're too healthy minded, thank heaven. Get out of it, Isma. Get out into the clean air and the country where you belong. You weren't made for a town with all its filthy vice and rottenness."

Isma shrugged her shoulders impatiently.

"It's all very well to say get out," she expostulated, "but where can I go? If I could have stayed on at Kings Crichton it would have been different. I should have had the place to run. I shouldn't have had time—to think. Of course I always knew it would go to the Digby Crichtons, that I'd have to leave it when Daddy died. That's why I always hated being a girl. But I never realized, until the time came, how hard it would be. It was something I always put out of my mind as too awful to think about. And now—oh, you don't know how it hurts. I'm just heartsick for it."

Blinded with sudden tears, she stumbled to her feet and stood shaking with the effort she was making to control emotion she had never surrendered to before; and, as his arm went round her, she gave way utterly, sobbing like a child, with her head pressed closely against the rough tweed of his coat.

But quickly she regained command of herself. With a stifled "Hanky, please. I can't find mine," she drew away, choking down her sobs and dabbing at her eyes with the very adequate article he had supplied. "I don't know what's the matter with me today," she sniffed. "I don't know why I'm telling you all this."

Since the one instinctive movement he had been unable to suppress, Arne had stood rigid, his lips tightly set to

keep back the words that had struggled for utterance; and, her own face hidden, Isma had not seen the look on his during the short moment he had held her to him; nor did she see the little smile, half sad, half tender, that flickered across it now. Reticent from a child, she had taken her father's death hardly, repelling all sympathy and masking her sorrow with an outward show of cold indifference, which had provoked universal comment and deceived all who knew her, with the single exception of this one man whose greater understanding of her rather complex character had enabled him to see what was hidden from others. Only he knew the true depths of her feelings, the full extent of her loneliness and desolation, and only he realized the unnatural strain she had put upon herself. But too wise in his knowledge to attempt to force her confidence, for over a year he had had patience to wait, hoping, almost praying, for her own sake, for the breakdown that had come so suddenly this afternoon. Yet though his patience had been rewarded, though he knew he had made a big step toward restoring the perfect comradeship which, until last year, had always existed between them, it was that same knowledge that warned him he must go warily, must avoid for the present all reference to the greater sorrow he guessed she still could not bear to enlarge on.

"Did you think I didn't know?" he said gently. "My dear, I've always known what it would mean to you to leave Kings Crichton. And I know it's just dread of seeing the place under new conditions that has made you refuse to come to us all this past year. But you'll have to see it some time, you know, and the longer you put it off the harder it will be for you. Why not take the plunge and get it over? You've only got to make up your mind —and the thing's done. We all want you. The Governor says the Abbey isn't the same place without you running in and out all the time. And I—"

"Oh, I can't," she broke in hurriedly, "not—not yet. It's too soon. I'd see Daddy everywhere."

"And if you had been able to stay on at Kings Crich-

ton—wouldn't it have been the same there?"

"No—yes—oh, I don't know. I tell you I can't come to the Abbey yet. Why can't you understand?"

"You never used to look at your fences before taking them." The implied censure stung her as he had meant it to sting. Her eyes began to flash warningly.

"You think—I'm being a coward?" she jerked out.

"I think you're being—morbid," he corrected quietly.

For a second she stared at him, her cheeks flaming. Then suddenly, as he had seen her so often in her childhood days, she lost her temper.

"I don't care two hoots what you think," she cried passionately, "and it's damned cheek your criticizing me, anyway. Just because you played big brother and bullied me when I was a kid, you needn't think you can bully me now. Not on your life. And if we're to remain friends you can just remember that, David." Yet the words were scarcely out before she regretted them, and bitterly ashamed of herself, dreading a rupture she had never contemplated, she turned to look into the fire, crumpling and uncrumpling the large silk handkerchief she had forgotten to give back. But, too well acquainted with her moods to be annoyed, Arne only smiled.

"I'm remembering a lot of things," he drawled, "but I don't seem to remember that I ever—bullied you."

"Oh, David, I'm a beast. You never did. You were always far too good to me. But you shouldn't have come today. I'm all to pieces. I'm not fit to speak to anyone." She paused, looking up at him doubtfully. "I didn't mean to tell you," she went on more slowly, "but I don't want you to go away thinking I'm a peevish brute for no reason at all." Again there was a pause. Then, in a whisper so low that he could scarcely hear it: "I went through hell last night, David."

The color drained suddenly from Arne's face, leaving it gray under the deep tan. But as he stared down into the frank eyes that met his for only an instant he saw in them, troubled though they were, what brought a quick sigh of relief, while silently he cursed himself for the horrible

thought that had leaped to his mind. Yet it was no new thought. She was straight as they were made, but she had mixed up with a reckless crowd, and all this last year he had been afraid—God, how afraid he had been for her, alone in this damnable sinkhole, in this mad unrestrained world turned topsy-turvy since the War. And there was nothing he could do, nothing he could say more than he had said already many times—and been ticked off as often for interfering. Thank heaven he had kept his fool mouth shut a moment ago, and not given himself away completely. As it was, she seemed to have noticed nothing, to be no more aware than he how long it was since she had spoken the words that had given him one of the worst moments he ever remembered.

Breathing a sigh of relief, he moved nearer to the fire.

"What about—last night?" Not quite under control yet, his voice rang harshly, and, startled, Isma looked up with a puzzled frown.

"Last night?" she repeated. "Well, it's rather a long story, and to make you understand I'll have to tell you what led up to it. I know you and Sir Michael think I've been utterly rotten all this last year. Oh, you needn't look like that. I know you do, and I don't blame you either. I have been rotten. But I haven't only been dancing and playing bridge and drinking more cocktails than were good for me. I've been doing something else, in between whiles, something I had to do to make up for being so absolutely useless during the War.

"It was bad enough the first two years, being kept at school. And when I made Daddy take me away he wouldn't let me be a nurse—I don't know why, but I expect he was right, really. Anyway, I wasn't sorry, for I should have loathed it—all the fuss, and the potty little rules and restrictions, I mean. And some of the Sisters—well, I've heard girls who were V.A.D.'s talk, and I know I shouldn't have been able to stick it. What I really wanted, and wanted desperately, was to get across to France and drive a car for one of the convoys. But you know how it was—I groused enough about it in my letters to you—they

wouldn't take me because I wasn't old enough. And driving ambulances here in London wasn't the same thing.

"Then the finish came, and Daddy was brought home to me, and I had him to care for. But after he died, and I had to leave Kings Crichton, I began to worry again, wondering what on earth I could do to make up for the little I had done. There were plenty of obvious jobs, but there didn't seem to be any lack of helpers for those. People were tumbling over themselves to walk out the blind men at St. Dunstan's, and lend cars for the cripples at Roehampton and the other ordinary hospital boys. I wanted something harder to do than that. Then suddenly one day I remembered the men Daddy had once told me about—the men who aren't men any more but just disfigured, dismembered fragments of men, who are hidden away and not talked about, because people can't bear to think of them, to remember what they represent. I thought if I could help with them it would make me happier, make me feel I was doing something, at any rate.

"I went to Sir Gerald Lowe—the surgeon who was so good to Daddy—and asked him how I could set about it. Of course he tried to put me off, the same silly old cry: I was too young, it wasn't a girl's job. I told him I didn't mind horrible sights, that I wasn't troubled with what Jinny calls 'the queasies,' and I badgered the old thing until he gave in and said I could try. He put me through a kind of probation test, the less revolting cases first, until I satisfied him my nerves were all right. Then he took me to one of the worst places, and I've been going there nearly every day ever since.

"It was pretty awful for the first week or two, but I'm used to it now—as used as one can get. I've never found it difficult to talk to the men, and of course that's been a help. And some of them are so extraordinarily interesting. But when you think of what they were, and then see them as they are now—oh, David, it's ghastly. It makes one wonder if they ought to be allowed to live at all, if it wouldn't be kinder to put them out of their misery. But I suppose that's the result of civilization. Well, all I can

say is I'd rather be uncivilized. And most of them are so plucky, it just tears one's heart to pieces. I thought I knew what courage was, watching Daddy all those months, but I never had the vaguest idea, until I started this work, how far human endurance could go. It makes me ashamed, every time I see them.

"About five months ago they gave me my special case. I call him that because he never had any other visitor. He was one of the worst and one of the hardest cases. He was only a boy, well under thirty, and he had lost everything —arms and legs all gone, and one side of his face simply wasn't there. But his brain was untouched, and it never gave him any rest or peace. He was an East-ender, used to work in the docks before the War, sharp as a needle and with a vivid imagination, as so many of them have. He had taken to soldiering like a duck to water, had meant to stay on in the army after we'd "blown the Germans to hell" as he said. Then he got knocked out, and all his dreams went west.

"If he hadn't had imagination, hadn't been so proud of his physical strength before, it might have been easier for him. But the contrast was too great. He wasn't a man any more, he said, only a revolting object of pity he didn't want and would damn you if you offered it—something that ought to have been knocked on the head like a maimed dog. Because he couldn't die, he hated himself. Because the doctors tried to keep him alive, he hated them.

"Sometimes he seemed to go raving mad, like a wild beast. And the horror of it was he was really sane, absolutely sane, the whole time. I saw him like that only once, and when it was over he asked my pardon for making a scene. Think of it! That was the only time I ever broke down. I couldn't help it. I just stood there and howled. And he begged me not to say anything about it in case 'They,' meaning the Authorities, wouldn't let me see him again. And nobody ever knew. He had a little room to himself, and fortunately the nurse was out of earshot. But that was after I got to know him well.

"I don't know how they ever induced him to let me see

him the first time. He wouldn't see anyone. Some of his mates had tried, but it wasn't any use. I always think the man who looked after him must have put in a good word for me. We'd got to be rather pals over some of the other cases. Anyhow, one day I was told I could see Harris if I wanted to. Of course by then I knew all about him—all, that's to say, the staff could tell me. And it didn't amount to much. He was sullen with everyone, and he seemed to take a horrid sort of morbid pleasure in making the worst of himself.

"The moment I walked into the room I saw he was out to make it as difficult for me as he possibly could. He was propped up in a chair by an open window looking out over a square where there were trees. He didn't look when I came in, and I could see only the unscarred side of his face. I made some perfectly futile remark about it being a fine day, and he growled out that one adjective day was the same as another to him. Then he flung his head round—I can't describe his action any other way—and glared at me, and, seen like that, he was pretty ghastly. But he wasn't much worse to look at than Henry—you remember, our old gamekeeper whose gun burst and blew half his face off when I was a youngster. But of course he didn't know anything about Henry, and he was just morbidly hoping I'd look sick or disgusted or something that would give him a chance to jibe.

" 'Pretty—ain't it?' he sneered. So I told him I'd seen worse, and asked him if he'd like a fag. He said he hadn't any use for ladies' muck. So I said neither had I, and shoved an appalling stinker into his mouth and lit it, and one for myself, and sat down on the window seat to try and talk. But I didn't make much headway that day. I couldn't get a line on him no matter how I tried, couldn't get anything out of him at all. It was like beating against a stone wall. And when time was up I thought that first visit was going to be the last. But to my amazement he asked for me the next day.

"And then, my hat, I went through it! He talked the whole time—I could hardly get a word in—all about the

beastly things that had happened in France, the filth and the smells, the way men got ripped into shreds, the human bits and pieces they found when old trenches were re-occupied. He went on piling horror on horror till I could have yelled. But I didn't yell. I'd have bitten my tongue through first. I knew he was only trying me out, seeing how much I could stand. And he didn't try it again. He was just sulky, or rude as the mood took him, and I used to wonder why he still asked for me.

"Then, one day, quite by chance, I found out what had been the absorbing hobby of his life. You'll never guess, David. Of all things in the world—*mice!* I never was so thankful I'd kept the nasty little beasts myself when I was in the nursery. But I found I was frightfully out of date. The fancy had gone ahead since my time. I only had white mice. It seems there are dozens of other varieties now. Well, anyhow, mice did the trick. He'd always kept mice, was an expert in mice, had even carried them in his pockets in the trenches. They were a godsend, those mice.

"When I got home that afternoon I roped in Parks, explained the difficulty I was in, and told him to get me all the papers and periodicals he could that dealt with mice, and reported mice shows. And you know what old Parks is. You never can stump him. He started off that very evening, and I was simply snowed under with mice literature. It was plain sailing with Harris after that. He'd talk mice by the hour. Then I thought I'd go one better and try and get him interested in other things. So I asked if I could take him out in the car. They said it would be all right if I could persuade him, but he was so sensitive about himself they didn't think I'd ever get him to agree. It was pretty hard work, but eventually I did persuade him, and I had him out several times. But he was all messed up inside, as well as being crippled, and about six weeks ago some complication or other developed, and the drives had to be given up.

"After that he went downhill fast, and Sir Gerald told me he couldn't last much longer. And the weaker he grew the more difficult he got to manage. He was only quiet

when I was with him. So all these last weeks I've been at the hospital some part of every day. I couldn't do anything, of course, and he didn't want anything, except to know I was there, to have a pal standing by, as he said once. And he made me promise I'd help him through at the last. And, oh, David, I dreaded it, for he thought death was the end of everything, that there was nothing to follow. And though he often said he hated God, it was only a form of speech. He didn't really believe in Him. He didn't believe in anything, and didn't want to believe. He'd keep quiet when I tried to tell him a little of what Daddy taught me, but it was only because it was me. The Padre, who is an awfully good sort and knows how to talk to most men, he simply cursed out of the room. And in the end the Padre gave it up. He said he didn't want to be a traitor to his cloth, but he just couldn't go on badgering the poor lad any longer; he'd done his best and he'd failed, but he didn't believe in eternal damnation and he was sure Harris would get his chance in the next world all right. So he left him to me, and because I wanted him to die in peace, not with those blasphemies on his lips, I didn't talk to him any more about religion.

"I suppose there are people who would say the Padre and I were both wrong, but I can't help that. One has to decide as one thinks best, and in this case I believe and shall always believe we did the only thing possible. The odd thing was, Harris wasn't afraid of death with no hereafter; he'd talk of it quite dispassionately; but he was afraid of what went immediately before, and he clung to my promise to see him through. All this last week I've known it might happen any moment, yet when I was with him yesterday afternoon he seemed stronger. But last night, just as I was going out to dinner, the hospital rang up to say would I come at once.

"I went as I was; I didn't even wait to change, and Parks rushed me to the hospital—I don't know how we got through without being held up for breaking the speed limit—and I was there all night; he didn't die until nearly half-past eight this morning. I can't tell you any more,

David, it was too awful. I only know I'll never forget it as long as I live."

There was a long silence after Isma stopped speaking. From start to finish Arne had made no comment, and he scarcely knew now what or what not to say. Much that had puzzled him for many months was explained, but, angry with himself for having misjudged her, torn between admiration and disapproval—for the thought of what she had brought herself in contact with was horrible to him—he found speech of any kind difficult.

"I'd have helped, if you'd only told me," he muttered.

"You wouldn't have had the time," she replied. "You have the Abbey to run, and Sir Michael and your own disabled men in the village to look after, to say nothing of all the work you've taken on in the county. Your hands are full—and you're lucky. I wonder if you know how lucky you are, and how I envy you. I had only this one thing to do, and I don't feel I can go on with that just yet awhile. I'm tired out. I never realized until today what a strain it's been. And it would never be quite the same again. The other men don't need me the way that poor boy did. I'm just where I was when Daddy died—I'm out of a job, and nobody really wants me." All the heart-hunger and loneliness she felt was in her voice. Yet as she looked, not at him, but into the fire, she seemed to have forgotten his nearness, to be only thinking aloud, talking to herself rather than to the man who had already a dozen times asked her to marry him; for there was no hint of provocation in her tone, no trace of self-consciousness in her unhappy little face.

Though he was perfectly aware of this, to Arne, who had come to her today determined on plainer speech than he had ever used before, it was an opportunity too welcome to let slide.

"There's one very lonely man who wants you—" he was beginning, but she checked him with a gesture.

"Please, *please,* David, don't start that all over again. I've told you no, times without number. Why can't you believe I mean what I say? I'm fond of you, yes. But I

don't love you, and I don't want to marry you. And you don't really want to marry me. You've got to marry somebody, some day, of course. That's understood. But you only want me because you're used to me, because we always did things together, and you think I wouldn't turn the Abbey upside down and inside out or want to get rid of all the old servants, like some of the modern girls you pretend you're afraid of. And I can't help it if Sir Michael is disappointed. He's a darling, and I adore him—but I can't marry you just to please him. That's asking too much, and risking too much.

"Of course if I thought you were going to break your heart about it, I'd hate to be talking like this. But you aren't, you know. You didn't start this silly business. It's Sir Michael's idea, and Daddy's, not yours, really. You'd never have thought of it if they hadn't put you up to it. So what is the use of trying to pretend what you don't feel? We've always been good friends. You've always been perfectly sweet to me. But you don't care for me in—in—oh, you know what I mean. You don't really love me—"

"I don't love you?" Fiercely he flung back the assertion, and before she could move she was in his arms. The hold he had kept over himself for years was gone at last and, white lipped, his big frame shaking, he drew her closer and closer till under her cheek she could feel the heavy pounding of his heart, till his strong clasp became pain that made her want to cry aloud. In that moment she learned the truth and, afraid of him for the first time in her life, she ceased to struggle, and lay still, aghast at her own blindness, at the undreamed-of passion her thoughtless words had let loose. Yet she had uttered them in all sincerity, believing what she said. Never once had she had the faintest idea that his feelings for her were other than platonic, that the friendship with which she was content contented him no longer.

But she ought to have known, she told herself miserably. She ought to have guessed long ago, would have guessed—if she had not been so utterly selfish, so completely absorbed in her own sorrow. She had thought only of herself,

and she only was to blame for what had happened now.

"Oh, David, I didn't know."

"You didn't know," he echoed bitterly, "or you thought all this last year that I was lying. Which?" Then, as she made no answer: "Have I ever lied to you?" he went on more gently. "Have I ever done anything that should make you think so damnably of me? You told me just now I was honest. If you believe that, do you think I'd ask you to marry me if I didn't love you, didn't want you as I've never wanted anything in heaven and earth? I've always loved you, always wanted you. When you were a child I used to dream of the time when you'd be old enough—to marry me, to give me the one thing that would make my life perfect. Then when you grew older, because you never changed, because you always came to me with any trouble, as you did when you were a little thing, I began to hope that some day my dream might come true. And always I've gone on hoping, loving you more, wanting you more every day.

"There's never been anyone but you, Isma, and never will be. A moment ago you spoke of the Abbey. Do you think the Abbey means anything to me—without you? While I live, there can be only one mistress of the Abbey. And though I want a son, God knows how badly, there will be no son to succeed me who isn't yours as well as mine." He felt the shudder that ran through her, and his lip quivered as he stooped his cheek to the dark head lying against his breast.

"Does it shock you so much to hear it," he murmured, "to know the dreams I've been fool enough to dream? I'd have told you long ago—if I'd been able. But I couldn't worry you with my selfish longings while your father needed you. And since then you've always shut me up, never given me the chance to say what I've said today. But it's all true, every word of it. I love you more than I can tell. There isn't a thought in my mind that isn't of you, and for you. I haven't a hope in the world that doesn't include you. Child, child, can't you believe in me yet? Can't you give me what I want?" The pleading in his deep

voice was almost more than she could bear, but fear, stronger than the new fear of him, was gripping at her heart.

"I can't," she panted. "I can't marry you. I don't love you enough—"

"But if I was willing to risk that—willing to chance your caring for me—some day?"

"No, no. It wouldn't be fair—to you. And you don't understand. I want to be free—quite, quite free. I don't want to be married. I don't want"—again he felt her shudder—"I don't want—children." Even before the stifled whisper reached him, he had guessed, yet hope died slowly.

"I'd leave you free," he said huskily. "I'd wait—I swear it—never ask you, never urge you against your will—for anything. And if I had to wait all my life, I'd still wait. It wouldn't make any difference to my love. Only give me the right to care for you. Give me the chance to try and make you happy."

A great sob broke from her as she lifted her head.

"Oh, don't, don't," she wailed, "don't make it harder for me than it is already. Don't make me hate myself more than I do. I've hurt you, and I never meant to. I never dreamed you cared—like that. If I could do what you want, I would. But I can't. I can't. I'm—*afraid.*"

Once more she tried to free herself, straining against the powerful arms that wrapped her like bands of steel; but for a moment longer he held her, tortured with the thought that he might never so hold her again, that his love, strong as it was, might never conquer the fear she had admitted. And in the rush of overwhelming longing that surged through him, suddenly he lost control of himself.

Yet the long, suffocating kiss he forced on her brought him no joy, only a feeling of self-contempt and loathing and a dark flush spread over his cheek as he let her go.

"Isma—darling, before God I never meant to do that."

Breathless and swaying she stood looking at him, her hands clenching and unclenching, her eyes swimming with angry tears. Then without a word she turned, and,

dropping down into the big armchair, buried her head in the thick cushions. To Arne her silence was less endurable than any outburst, and with heavy steps he strode to the window to lean against the casement and stare out into the darkening street where stood the low-built, high-powered car that was waiting to take him back to the north.

But of what passed beneath him he saw nothing. He could only think of the look he had seen on her face before she turned away, a look he prayed passionately he might never see again. Disgust, as well as the fear he had already realized. Accustomed from babyhood to his constant companionship, to spend whole days alone with him, until today she had never shown any trace of embarrassment or sex-consciousness in his presence; while he, on his side, had never given her occasion. But today he had let her know all the longing that possessed him, and, her cold chastity revolted by a quick perception of the physical urge which had found expression in that unpremeditated kiss, for the first time in her life she had shrunk from his touch—had shrunk from him as if he had been a leper. Her confidence broken, she would never trust him again. From now on she would always be fearful of a recurrence of what had shocked her, would think of him with loathing as just a hungry beast seeking its mate.

And wasn't he? Arne's face flushed again as he pondered the mental question. In one sense, perhaps, yes, he admitted to himself. He didn't pretend to be a saint, and he wanted what every healthy, vigorous animal wanted. But far above that he wanted her happiness, the right to stand between her and a world that might hurt her, to know that she was safe, as, in his love and protection, she would be.

And now, at the very start, he had mucked up everything. Why had he been such a damned precipitate fool? Why couldn't he have shown more understanding and consideration? He had found her overwrought, her nerves jangling and on edge with the horror of the previous night, and in his infernal selfishness he had forced her

through a further emotional strain she was not fit to bear. That was all his love had brought her so far, only more trouble and unhappiness. To save her even a sigh he would go through hell itself, and because of him she was crying her heart out over there by the fire.

Hot tears rose in his own eyes and he half turned, then swung back to the window again, tugging savagely at his mustache. She didn't want him, he reflected bitterly. And if he went to her, what could he say? Nothing she would want to hear. He had made a rotten mess of things this afternoon. But it couldn't end like this. Black as his chances looked now, he wasn't going to give up the hope of his life without another effort to get what he wanted. He would have to start all over again, try before anything else to win back her confidence. And then some day, please God, he might win her love—and with love her fear must go.

But that day hadn't come yet, and there was the difficult position of the moment to deal with first before he could think of the future. The impasse they had reached was impossible. One or other of them would have to make a move and if she didn't speak soon he must. But moment succeeded moment, and he was still racking his brains for words when he heard the springs of the chair creak, then the sound of her light footsteps coming slowly toward the window. It seemed an age before she reached him, before he felt the touch on his arm that made his pulses leap. Very gently his hand closed over hers.

"Does that mean I'm forgiven—that you'll forget this afternoon, and let things be as they were?"

For a moment she hesitated, her fingers plucking nervously at his sleeve.

"I oughtn't to, for your own sake," she faltered at last. "I ought to tell you to go away and not bother about me any more. But I'm too selfish. I can't do without your friendship, David. I can't lose you—altogether."

It was a crumb to a starving man, but more than he had dared to hope, and his gloomy face brightened as he squeezed her hand reassuringly.

"That's all right, my dear," he said quickly. "I'm not going to sulk just because you've turned me down. If you want me any time, you know where to send. And if you don't send, I'll come along fast enough to see what mischief you're up to," he added with a smile. And the old bantering tone that had come back into his voice, the abrupt resumption of his usual brotherly manner seemed to ease the awkwardness of the situation and lessen Isma's own feeling of constraint. But to neither did further speech come readily, and for some time they stood side by side, staring out silently into the darkness.

Then a street lamp near the house flared brilliantly, and at the same moment Parks, Isma's chauffeur, came leisurely up the area steps and, crossing the pavement, turned on the lights of the waiting car. The sight of it made her forget all remaining embarrassment, and, with a little excited exclamation, she pressed nearer to the window, flattening her nose against the glass in her efforts to see more clearly.

"Is that the new bus?" she cried eagerly. "Oh, David, what a dream! What does she do? What can you get out of her?"

Arne gave a little laugh.

"Come back with me to the Abbey tonight, and see for yourself," he suggested promptly. Her whole thought still on the car, Isma drew a deep breath.

"I'd love to," she burst out. Then, realizing the trap she had fallen into: "Some other time, I mean," she amended in swift confusion. "I can't go to the Abbey—yet." And, turning from the glittering temptation, she walked back to the fireplace and began assiduously stirring the coals into a brighter blaze.

The gleam that leaped to Arne's eyes faded.

"But you'll come, some day, Isma?" he said, with a touch of impatience, as he followed her across the room.

"If I come," she hesitated, "will you promise to—not to —I mean, you won't—" Stammering she broke off, her face scarlet.

"I'll promise to be the perfect little gentleman, if that's

what you mean," he said, smiling. "And now that's settled, when is it to be?"

But an actual date was more than she was prepared to give; and, though he stayed for a full half hour longer, using every persuasion he knew, he could get nothing from her but a vague assurance that it would be "some time this year." And with no more than that slight encouragement to help him on his way, he had to start back on the long run to Denes Abbey.

Left alone in the big room that seemed suddenly to have become strangely chill and empty, Isma sat on in the deep armchair, thinking of the friendship that had existed not only between her and the man who had just left her but between their respective families—a friendship that went back many generations, for since Elizabeth's time Arnes and Crichtons had always held together. All her life Isma had looked on Denes Abbey as a second home. And all her life there had been David, thirteen years older than she, to take the place of the brother she had never had.

Reluctantly, at length, she dragged her thoughts back to the present. She had been horrible to him today, poor old David, she reflected with a heavy sigh; but how could she have guessed he was going to go off the deep end like that? And, afterward, she hadn't even had the decency to make an end of the whole business once and for all. She had let him go, still hoping, when she hadn't the least intention of marrying him. If it had been anyone else, she wouldn't have cared, wouldn't be feeling so utterly wretched and miserable. But to have to hurt David was ghastly. And if he persisted in this hateful marriage idea, she would have to go on hurting him—or do what even in her thoughts she shrank from with disgust and horror.

If it came to that! The sense of fear and powerlessness she had experienced in his arms that afternoon rushed over her again with renewed force and, springing to her feet, she fell to pacing the room, her hands locked tightly behind her. It was not his mere physical strength but the knowledge she had of his obstinate and determined nature that made her feel so helpless. His will was stronger than

hers—he had proved it time and again—and in the end he would get his way in this as in everything else; for when had he ever given up anything on which his mind was set?

For a moment she stood still, shuddering with sheer panic. Then common sense reasserted itself, and with a half-hysterical little laugh she dropped down in the armchair again. Had she gone quite mad, she asked herself angrily. Her nerves must be in a pretty awful state if she could think drivel like that. People weren't forcibly married in these days, and David wasn't a savage to drag her off by the hair of her head.

She laughed again, but it was a laugh that was very near a sob. Why, oh, why had David spoiled everything by falling in love with her? What was to be the outcome of it all? Would it end in her having to break definitely with both him and Sir Michael? Yet how could she bear to break with them? She couldn't lose the only two friends she really cared for and really trusted. Lonely as she had been since her father's death, she had always had the comforting remembrance that there were David and Sir Michael to depend on for help and advice whenever she needed it. If she cut adrift from them there would be nobody left in the world, except some of the old servants, to care what became of her.

Tears rose in her eyes, and impatiently she dashed them away. Getting soppy about it wouldn't help matters. And it wasn't any good blinking at facts. It was only her own rank cowardice that had made this trouble between her and David. All her life she had known his worth; more than any living soul, she trusted and admired him; and, if marriage hadn't been to her the unutterably loathly thing it was, she could have sent him home happy this afternoon, and been happy herself at this moment, as any ordinary woman would who had been lucky enough to win his love.

Another deep sigh came from her. Why was she made so different from other women? Why couldn't she feel what they felt? It would have been easy then to give him what he wanted, to fulfill the wish her father had confided

the night before he died, and to please Sir Michael. But she couldn't. And the thought of Denes Abby now loomed like a nightmare. David, she could trust to keep his promise not to trouble her, during this first visit, with any reference to what had passed between them today. But Sir Michael was another story. If she went to the Abbey, Sir Michael was going to be difficult. It was all going to be difficult—too difficult to cope with now when she was dead with sleep and her brains felt like pulp. And she hadn't given any definite date. She needn't decide anything tonight. Tomorrow, or next week, or even next month would be time enough to think of it. Meanwhile she was for bed, as fast as she could get there.

Chapter Two: PROBLEMS AND UNCERTAINTIES

IN THE CHESTNUT-PANELED ROOM where centuries before the Virgin Queen had slept, Isma stood looking about her with a smile that held memory and pleasure and the faintest touch of doubt. Who was she to occupy the Queen's Chamber, she asked herself, frowning. True she had given only a day's notice of her coming, and on her arrival, an hour ago, David had said that the house was full; but surely some other less important room could have been found for her. Unless— She made a little wry face, then shrugged her shoulders and laughed softly at her own conceit. It was the old housekeeper, Mrs. Merridew, who arranged the guest rooms, not David, so she needn't think there was any particular significance in the choice that had been made.

As a child she had spent many rainy days in it—grave and important with the trust reposed in her—playing Bess of England in antique finery borrowed from the store of old clothes in the cupboards in the attics. And once, a red-letter day that, she had even been allowed to slip her own slim feet into the pair of jeweled, high-heeled slippers the royal waiting maids had forgotten when their imperious mistress went on her way from Denes Abbey to tax the hospitality of some other loyal subject. Tangible

evidence of a memorable occasion, they had always been kept in the room, housed now for greater security in a small glass-fronted recess in the paneling near the big open fireplace where tonight two logs burned brightly on a pile of wood ash.

With another little smile, Isma moved across the intervening space to look at them, her mind going back to the time when she had gazed at the faded dainty relics with childish awe. How long ago it seemed, and how happy she had been then! Would she ever be really and truly happy again? Was she going to be happy here among all the old memories, or only more homesick and miserable?

It was nearly eight months since that evening in London when she had promised David she would come to the Abbey—some time. Determined to postpone the difficult visit as long as possible, and London becoming every day more and more unendurable, she had left England almost immediately, without seeing him again. Since then, driven by restlessness that only constant movement could alleviate, she had traveled, with the elderly maid who had been her nurse, half round the world and back again. But travel had not given her the peace of mind she sought, and, as suddenly as she had left England, she had returned, in perfect physical health, but restless and unhappy as she had been eight months before.

Abruptly she turned from the little showcase and, going nearer to the fire, stretched cold hands out to the blaze, her thoughts on the future. What was life bringing to her, she wondered. What did she want of life, she who ever since her father left her had seemed to be seeking for something, an indeterminate longing she could never resolve into form? Was it really only want of some definite interest and occupation, the old story of too much money and nothing to do, that made her days seem so empty and useless? Yet what could she do? With her wealth, anything—to help others less fortunate than she. But not in London. She could never live in London again. Whatever she did must be done in the country—among strangers and strange

surroundings.

Her lip quivered, and, crossing to one of the deep window embrasures, she slipped behind the drawn curtains to stare out into the moonlit park that stretched as far as she could see. Beyond the shadowy oaks and beeches, lay Kings Crichton, only five miles distant, where she had been born and was loved, but where there was no welcome for her now. Only five miles, and she knew every step of the way, could have walked it blindfold.

A choking sob broke from her. If she could have lived on at Kings Crichton, with no problems and uncertainties to perplex her! In the dear home there would have been so much for her to do, a life's work full of interest, duty that would have been pleasure, and unbounded scope for all her energy. The farms and cottages, the many servants and dependents, friends all of them since her babyhood—If she could have gone on caring for them, working for and with them. They had been like one big family, sharing one another's joys and sorrows, and now—many were already gone and others going, a new master and a new regime in which personal interest held no place.

Some of the letters she had received from tenants under notice to quit, tenants whose tenancy had continued from father to son for generations, had wrung her heart. But she could do nothing. It was no business of hers now, and her intercessions carried no weight with the far-off cousin whom she had never even seen, and whose succession to the property seemed to be bringing only misery and discord to the people who before had always been so happy and contented. They were the people she loved and understood. To the new owner they were merely machines, pig-headed clodhoppers who resented change.

And as it was now at Kings Crichton, so it was with many of the neighboring properties, old families impoverished by the War giving place to moneyed outsiders with no traditions behind them. Names that had been household words gone off the map, and of the many who once held sway in the county only the Arnes and a very few others remained. At Denes Abbey there was no change,

and never likely to be. The Abbey estate was run as her father had run Kings Crichton, as she herself would have run it if she hadn't had the poisonous luck to be born a girl. But Kings Crichton had passed to a stranger—and what other place could ever be really home to her? Tears filled her eyes, and turning from the window she went back into the room.

Perfect of its kind it was, and, as she looked at the stately carved bed with its tapestry hangings, at massive armoires, at dower chests and heavy armchairs that were all museum pieces, a slow smile came to chase away her tears. Would David's wife—if he ever had one—love the Queen's Chamber as she loved it, or would she make a clean sweep of Elizabeth, her furnishings, and substitute new hygienic monstrosities from the Tottenham Court Road? Not if David had any say in the matter. And David would say a lot if any strange woman started monkeying with the Abbey. Yet, if he loved her—

While I live, there can be only one mistress of the Abbey. Isma could almost hear the words, the strange passion in his voice that had been so new to her. She shivered. It wasn't any use trying to get away from it. David wasn't of those who change. He loved her, and no other woman in the world would he ask to be his wife. And if David had no son, then the Abbey too must pass to strangers, pass altogether from the line that had held it so long, for there were no Arnes left to succeed when David died. Must he go all his life lonely and unhappy because of her? Must misery come to the Abbey, as it had come to Kings Crichton, just because she had been born without the natural instincts of a woman?

Her face burned, and agitatedly she began to pace the room. Why was all this thrust on her shoulders? Why must she have to decide the happiness of so many? She loved them, those kindly Abbey folk, knew them and loved them almost as well as her own people at Kings Crichton—but the cost of their happiness was greater than she could pay. She couldn't surrender her liberty, couldn't give herself—her body—like an animal—it was too ghastly,

too revolting even to think of. And to marry David under the conditions he had suggested was equally out of the question. She would still be tied, morally if not physically, while no man, certainly not David, could find happiness or contentment in such a marriage, and the end might be tragedy for both of them. If she hadn't been so desperately homesick, hadn't yielded to that perfectly insane impulse to come here! She had only put herself in a false position and raised David's hopes for nothing. It was a poisonous thing to have done. But it was too late to think of that now. She was here; and here, for a few days at least, she must stay. Thank heaven there was a crowd in the house; things would be easier than if she had been the only guest.

The distant booming of a gong made her look at the watch on her wrist. Only the warning gong, and still half an hour to dinnertime. But the message David had given her from Sir Michael, who was resting when she arrived, asking her to be down early?

With a hasty glance at an antique mirror hanging on the wall, a mirror tradition said had been bought expressly for the royal visitor's convenience, she went quickly out of the room.

Complete silence reigned in the visitors' wing when Isma reached the head of the stairs and ran down, her heart beginning to beat a little faster, for she rather dreaded this first interview with Sir Michael. Through the empty hall she passed into the drawing-room, a somewhat formally arranged room which, since Lady Arne's death, was used only on rare occasions. Neither David nor Isma had any recollection of a mother. Mrs. Crichton had died in giving birth to the girl who should have been a boy; while Lady Arne, many years younger than her husband, who had waited until middle age to marry, had broken her neck over wire in the hunting field when her son was still too young to have any knowledge of his loss.

It was a strange fatality that, twenty years later, on the very anniversary of his wife's death, Sir Michael, already an old man, had taken a similar toss in almost the exact spot, an accident from which he had never com-

pletely recovered. Yet, very tall and reputed to be the handsomest man in England—far handsomer than his more stalwart, broader-shouldered son, whose face was too strong for real beauty—he still held himself erect in spite of his age, still retained the courtesy and charm of manner that had made him a distinguished figure in diplomatic circles in his youth. But the roving life of an attaché had not appealed to him, and when still quite young he had retired from public life. Since his wife's death he had lived only for the son he idolized. His constant companion, friend as well as son, David was the pivot of his existence, and David's happiness his only thought and trouble.

Always Isma had known this, and, waiting for him now, in no small trepidation, her back to the fire and looking anxiously at the door through which he might come at any moment, she wondered how much he knew, if indeed he knew anything at all, of what had passed between David and herself in London, and what his attitude was going to be. She held the next place to David in his heart; but, if he even thought that she was going to make David suffer, she knew whom Sir Michael would side with.

When at last he came, with his usual quick step, and carrying his white head high, sudden and unusual shyness kept her mute and motionless on the hearthrug. And as she watched his easy and graceful passage between orderly arranged chairs and tables, her face grew more and more perplexed; for, though she was looking straight at him, he did not seem to notice her, and halfway across the long room he stopped and stood as if listening, his hands going out in a little fumbling gesture.

"Is anyone—" he began. But already Isma had guessed, and before he could finish the question her strong young arms were round him and all her nervousness forgotten in a rush of sorrowful love and pity, while her eyes searched the beautiful dark ones which, outwardly unchanged, looked down sightlessly into hers.

"Oh, Uncle Michael," she breathed, and in her distress the old childish term she had not used for years slipped

out unconsciously. "I didn't know. Why didn't David write to me?"

For a moment he held her closely, then smiled and, keeping one of her hands in his, walked with her to the fireplace.

"And where might David have written to, Miss Gadabout?" he retorted, still smiling. "You never cabled an address without cabling the next day to change it. David and I have learned more geography in the last eight months than we ever knew before."

"But when I came—tonight, David never said anything."

"Because I told him I'd rather tell you myself, in my own way. And now you know, we won't speak of it again. I don't want any sympathy, little Isma. You gave me that without needless words a moment ago. After all, at my age, it's a very little thing. There are worse disabilities than blindness, my dear. And I'm very lucky, really. I've David to be eyes to me, and the servants are all most wonderfully kind and helpful; they never move a piece of furniture out of its place, and I can find my way about every room. So you see it might be very much worse than it is. And now how's my little girl been all this long time? Your cables were acceptable, but scarcely informative," he added with a laugh.

Shakily she laughed back at him, knowing that no further reference to his affliction would be permitted, that she must suppress the emotion which, welling up in her throat, seemed to be almost strangling her. With only one tight squeeze of the finely shaped old hand, still lying on her arm, she took up the cue he had given, and began to speak of her travels, talking easily and naturally until, by twos and threes, the rest of the house party drifted into the room. They were mostly men friends of David's, with a few youngish married women and, last to arrive, a white-haired, stately old dowager marchioness, a cousin of Sir Michael's, who was a frequent visitor at the Abbey.

All her life Isma had known Lady Merston, and as a child had often been soundly rated by her for tomboyish-

ness and youthful escapades. But tonight she was received with very special graciousness, and a proprietary fussiness that drew many eyes in her direction and convinced her that not only Sir Michael but Sir Michael's cousin cherished hopes of the marriage which everyone except herself seemed to think was inevitable.

Growing every moment hotter and more ill at ease, and signaling furtively to the few people present whom she knew, she was trying to escape from the old lady's persistent and pointed questioning when Arne came in with a telegram in his hand and made his way to the group standing round the fire.

"No good waiting any longer for Hoyt and his friend, sir," he said to his father; "I've just had a wire saying they missed the express from Birmingham and are coming on by a slow train. They can't get here now until ten."

In the dining-room, a few minutes later, Isma found herself placed next to Arne at the foot of the table, where some of the younger guests were congregated. Halfway down the opposite side, and at her own right hand, were two vacant seats. The men who had missed their train, she decided, and bent to glance at the name card beside her, glanced a second time, and then turned to Arne with a ripple of mirth.

"Who's Alcibiades B. Hoyt, David?" she murmured under cover of the general conversation. "I never heard such a heavenly name."

Arne grinned responsively.

"Thought you'd like it," he replied; "but you mustn't make fun of Alcibiades, Isma. The Sagamore is awfully proud of it. Seems there's been an Alcibiades in the Hoyt family ever since the Flood—according to himself."

"Yes, but who is he? He must be an American, with a name like that."

"He's an American, all right," said Arne, nodding, "and a regular old filibuster, always out for a scrap whenever he can get one. Got Red-Indian blood in him, and doesn't know what the word fear means. I met him in France, with a Canadian regiment who were billeted near us for

a while. He couldn't wait for his own country to come in, so he went Canadian for the War. We were together in a mess up early in the show, and after that I got to know him pretty well. He did me a very good turn once in France, and I've often wanted to get him here, but I lost his address and couldn't trace him. Then a few weeks ago he wrote from London saying he was in England on business with a friend, and might he drop in some day. So of course I told him to come, and bring his friend. They've been here about three weeks, off and on. They seem to be making a tour of the principal manufacturing towns, as far as I can make out, though what interest the Sagamore can have in manufactures beats me. Roman remains are his specialty, when there isn't a war on somewhere."

"And his friend?"

"Is an Arab."

Isma looked up.

"An Arab," she ejaculated, "but how perfectly thrilling. What sort of Arab? One of those Mespot ones who are squabbling about Mecca and those greasy old pilgrims? Is your Arab greasy, David?"

"Sorry to disappoint you—no. Quite the reverse. Has a tub every morning, to my certain knowledge. And he isn't an Arabian Arab. He comes from somewhere in the Sahara."

"Sounds a vague sort of address. But what's he like, himself? No, don't laugh, David. I know you always say you never notice what people look like, but you notice a lot, really, and you've simply got to tell me all about him before he comes. I can't somehow picture an Arab at the Abbey. What on earth does cousin Minnie make of him?" Isma added, with a mischievous glance at the top of the table, where Lady Merston was holding forth at length in her usual dogmatic fashion.

Arne shrugged his shoulders.

"Better ask her," he replied. "She hasn't favored me with an opinion. But, honestly, Isma, I don't know how to describe him except that he's just a little bit of a chap, not much taller than you, and thin as a lath. But he's all

muscle, enormously strong, and, gad, he can ride. I put him up on your Gadfly a few days ago, and the little mare just loved him. She's all over herself these days, doesn't get nearly enough to do. I've only one lad who can ride her, and she has him off five days out of six. If she was up to my weight I'd exercise her myself, but I'm stones too heavy, so the lad has to do his best, and she just plays with him, the cunning little devil."

"She's a sweet pet," Isma corrected indignantly, "and I'm just aching to get her between my knees again. Can't we have her out early tomorrow, David, before breakfast? You'll be with the guns the rest of the day, won't you?"

Arne's dark eyes lit with sudden pleasure.

"I hoped you'd suggest it," he said softly, "but I didn't know if you'd want—"

"Want to ride my Gadfly?" Isma interrupted hastily. "What else do you think I came here for?" And with a little grimace at him she turned to speak to her neighbor beyond the empty seat, determined to make David attend to his other guests for the remainder of dinner. She had been the object of too much attention already this evening, she reflected, while aloud she chatted of mutual friends to the woman next her.

She wasn't going to play the role of prospective daughter-in-law just because it was expected of her. And it was all her own fault. She might have known, if she had only stopped to think, what her coming to the Abbey would naturally imply to everybody who knew her and David. The only thing she could do was to avoid being seen too much alone with him. She would ride with him in the morning, and any other morning he wished, before the rest of the party were out of their beds—for, after all, he was David and she wanted to be with him—but beyond that she must herd with the crowd. And, in any case, his duties as host would keep him pretty fully occupied.

It was this resolution that, after dinner, made her avoid the hall, where bridge tables were set out, and retreat into the drawing-room, to wander aimlessly about looking at pictures and cases of miniatures she knew by heart and

listening, without paying much heed, to the steady flow of talk that came from Lady Merston, who, sitting close to the fire on a hard, straight-backed chair, for she despised the modern tendency to lounge, was laying down the law to a few selected victims.

Eventually the need of a cigarette, to which she knew the old lady strenuously objected, drove her into the adjoining conservatory. Then, for nearly half an hour, she wandered among the ferns and palm trees, recognizing old favorites and noting fresh specimens that had been added since her last visit. But the conservatory was full of memories of her father, who had helped Sir Michael to replan it, and memory became such pain that at last she went to re-enter the drawing-room. As she reached the open door, Lady Merston's voice came clearly and distinctly: "—*most* suitable in every way, and of course we have been expecting it for a long time. The engagement will probably be announced while Isma is here. David is—"

What David was, Isma did not wait to hear. With a smothered "blasted old gossip," she turned and fled out into the moonlit garden, shaking with rage.

The night was cold, but, hot with anger, she scarcely noticed the fresh wind blowing about her face and bare shoulders as she stood, with clenched hands and heaving breast, wondering miserably if she ought to leave the Abbey the next morning or stay and pretend she had heard nothing. But she *had* heard. And those other women in the drawing-room—from now on they would be waiting and watching, spying on her at every turn, making what she had hoped would be a happy time unendurable. This way and that her mind went until at length, soothed insensibly by the sheer beauty of her surroundings, she grew calmer. And soon a colder gust of wind, that whipped her short hair into her eyes and made her teeth chatter, sent her back shivering to the house.

Pass through the conservatory again and run the gantlet of those goggling eyes she would not. The front door was probably shut by now, for half an hour ago the stable

clock had struck ten, the time the two men from Birmingham were expected, but there was a small door near the gunroom which was usually left unlocked until David went to bed. It was unlocked tonight, and, entering, she ran quickly through a maze of passages and up a flight of back stairs, then down a long corridor until she reached the gallery outside the Queen's Chamber. A glance into the hall below showed several of the bridge tables still occupied, but David was gone, and Sir Michael's armchair by the fire was empty. David was almost certain to be in the billiard room, while Sir Michael had probably gone to bed. Should she too slip away and try to sleep to forget how unhappy and alien she felt in this house that before had always been like a second home? But she wasn't sleepy —and Alcibiades! She must see him before she went to bed.

The billiard room, which also held a grand piano, was a huge room, with two fireplaces, the principal one set in a deep alcove where were a chesterfield and several armchairs. Here, too, were many memories of the past, and as she came in Isma could almost see her father and Sir Michael, drowsy after a day in the open, sitting half asleep over their cigars by the fireside, and David at the piano, with herself curled up in a chair beside him, listening as she had loved to listen by the hour to his playing.

But tonight the piano was closed, and David, standing in the alcove with his back to the fire and a pipe between his teeth, was deep in talk with the two strangers.

The first glance brought her a momentary feeling of disappointment. The American, very tall and loosely made, with a keen, thin face under a thick crop of prematurely gray hair, was a typical example of his kind. She had seen many like him during the last eight months. And the Arab. No silk-swathed turban, no flowing robes such as she had imagined. Clad in correct dinner jacket and boiled shirt, and looking perfectly at home in them, his brown, clean shaven face only a shade more darkly tanned than David's, the short, slenderly built man might have been a Spaniard or any other southern European. Yet there was something oriental in the supple graceful-

ness of his movements, and with it an intense but quiet dignity that suggested an age-old race as well as birth and breeding. Obviously a gentleman, she decided, whatever his nationality, and exceptionally handsome, though with the most tragic and melancholy eyes she had ever seen. But what a shrimp he looked between tall, powerful David and the equally tall, big-boned American. No wonder he could ride the Gadfly. Well, the 'Fly wasn't for his use any more, now that she was here to ride the darling herself. There were plenty of other horses in the Abbey stables, devils too some of them, if that was what he wanted. He certainly looked as if he could ride, but, good rider though he might be, David could probably knock spots off him if it came to a test, for David was a born horseman, and his favorites were usually vicious brutes that few besides himself cared to handle.

Critically she looked at them both, and suddenly an odd feeling of disinclination to have anything to do with this somber-faced Arab made her turn to the billiard table, where a man and one of the younger married women were playing. She had come into the room, as she thought, unnoticed, but Arne had seen her quiet entrance, and when she moved to join the group of onlookers he waved and called to her. Still with the same feeling of reluctance she went slowly to the alcove.

"Where's Sir Michael?" she asked, before Arne could effect any introductions.

"Gone off to roost," he replied; "has to keep early hours these days. But where have you been hiding? I've been searching the house for you."

"Garden," she said laconically. "The drawing-room was —stuffy." But she flushed as she said it, and Arne laughed as he glanced at her wind-tossed hair.

"Sure it wasn't the stables?" he teased. "I nearly went down there. Thought you might be taking a look at the little 'Fly." Then, with a nod toward the two strangers: "This is Mr. Hoyt, Isma, and the Sidi Said ben Aissa."

The American's greeting was characteristic, and, seen nearer, Isma rather liked the look of his lean, ugly face.

But the Arab seemed either shy with or indifferent to women. Barely touching the hand she held out, and with only one swift glance at her, he murmured a few conventional words in perfect English, though with a strong American accent, and then drew away, leaving his more effusive companion to carry on the conversation. Yet more than once in the hour that followed, Isma found him watching her intently, and, annoyed by his persistent stare, little by little she moved her chair until Arne's broad shoulders were between her and the penetrating dark eyes that seemed to look right through her.

But with the genial outspoken American she was very quickly at ease, though his first words after she sat down were rather a surprise.

"I'd have recognized you anywhere, Miss Crichton," he said, smiling, subsiding onto the high fender guard and crossing one lanky leg over the other. "I know your face quite well, even though I haven't had the pleasure of meeting you before. It's this way. I've got a sister, keeps house for me in Algeria, where we live. She's an artist, and a mighty fine one too if I do say it, but she's got a bad habit of stealing portraits wherever she goes—in restaurants, on trains, on board ship, it doesn't matter where. When she sees a type that appeals to her, for any one reason or another, out comes Cassie's sketchbook. And believe me, Miss Crichton, I've been through scenes, and paid fortunes to angry folk who didn't want to part with their faces. But no amount of talking from me will stop her. Cassie is the most persistent female I've ever met up with. Well, she took a trip out home a few months ago and on the train somewhere she saw a face, and, being Cassie —I've told you she's a remarkably persistent woman—she got your name as well as your features. And right now I'd like to tender my most humble apologies, for you'll never get them from Cassie."

"There's no need," laughed Isma, "and I remember your sister quite well. Tall and gray haired, and looks at you over the top of her glasses. She made an awfully good sketch of the Negro porter on the train. He brought it to

show me. But I didn't know she'd sketched me. I'd love to have it. Do you think she'd send it to me if I wrote and asked her?"

Hoyt's smiling face became instantly grave.

"Miss Crichton," he said solemnly, "you make me feel terribly. But the fact is"—he paused for a second to scowl at the glowing end of his cigar—"well, my sister Cassie is as careless as she's persistent, and she lost that sketch shortly after she got back to Algeria. Says it was in the portfolio with a lot of others last time she looked, and then the next time it was gone. Comes of leaving things lying around. You wouldn't believe the number of things she's lost, and it don't worry her one little bit. It's only me that worries. I'm everlastingly buying shirts and socks Cassie can't account for. But I'll have another hunt for that sketch the very minute I get back to Algiers."

For a time the conversation ran on Isma's travels. Then a chance remark set both men talking of the War, story following story in rapid succession: and when Isma went to bed they were still talking, while, in the far corner to which he had retired, the Arab sat in silent aloofness, staring broodingly into space.

It was nearly midnight, but in the Queen's Chamber Isma found her old maid dozing over the fire. Time and again, in view of her age, had she forbidden Jinny to sit up late for her. But always Jinny was waiting. And tonight as always, remonstrance was useless, and, not until she saw her young mistress between the lavender-scented sheets of the solemn four-poster did she betake herself, yawning, to her own room.

But sleep would not come to Isma, and for long she lay awake, tossing restlessly and thinking, until thought drove her from her bed and eventually out into the gallery that was faintly lit by the moonlight shining through a glass dome in the roof. At the head of the staircase she paused, then slowly, lingering on each step, went down. She was in the empty, ghostly looking hall, where logs in the open fireplace were still smoldering, when a faint sound, coming from the direction of the billiard room, brought her

to a sudden halt, to stand for an instant listening, and then speed swiftly back to her room, to toss again in wakefulness for another hour.

Yet she was up early the next morning, and her small sunburned face showed no signs of broken rest when, at half-past six, already dressed in the neat cut cords and tweed jacket Jinny had laid out for her the night before, she stood by the open window stamping her feet down more comfortably into her long boots and buckling the strap of her wrist watch.

The watch secured safely, she picked up a hunting crop and, pushing the casement windows wider, leaned out, sniffing the fresh air eagerly. Beneath her, stretching the length of the house, lay a wide stone terrace, from the center of which, directly opposite the windows of the Queen's Chamber, a long flight of steps led down to a sunken formal garden, backed by a thick belt of trees that screened the stables.

On the ornamental balustrade at the top of the steps, Arne was sitting, a cigarette drooping from his lips, his eyes bent on the flagstones he was idly switching with his whip. Too early yet for the gardeners to be about, there was no one else in sight, and Isma swung herself up deftly onto the stone windowsill.

"Hi, David," she called softly. "Catch!" And, sending her crop spinning through the air, she clambered quickly down the thick wisteria branches that made an almost perfect natural ladder to the ground.

He was close beside her when she dropped to the flagstones and turned to face him, exhibiting dusty hands she proceeded to clean on her spotless cords.

"My good child," he began, "that wisteria—"

"Safe as houses," she broke in. "I've been there before. And you looked so patient, I had to come the shortest way. Hope I haven't kept you waiting long?"

"I didn't think you were awake," he answered, as they went down the steps. "I was going to chuck up a stone in another five minutes."

"And probably have broken the window," she said,

laughing. "See what I've saved you. Cigarette, please."

Mechanically he held out his case, then drew it back.

"Had anything to eat?" he asked, in the big-brotherly voice of years ago that brought a meek "Yes, sir—please, sir" before she laughed again and took the case from his hand, jeering at him. "You fussy old owl, you're as bad as Jinny, who made coarse remarks last night about my riding on an empty 'stomick.' Honestly though, I've had lots to eat. Biscuits, dozens of them."

Crossing the formal garden where the flagged paths were too narrow for two to walk abreast, she drew ahead, waiting for him when she reached the wooden door set in the high red-brick boundary wall that gave access to the little wood beyond. And, waiting, she had time to study him more closely than she had yet had opportunity, for he was following slowly. Last night she had disputed Jinny's assertion that his father's illness had aged him. But now, in the daylight, he did look older and more like Sir Michael than she had ever seen him. Yet his step was as springy, his big muscular body as lithe and flexible as it had ever been. Perhaps it was only loss of sleep that had brought those deeply cut lines into his face this morning. The management of such a large estate meant hard work for a man who was his own agent, and with a houseful of guests he must often have to stay up for hours working off arrears. But he hadn't been working last night—not all the time.

"Do you often sit up all night playing to yourself, David?" she asked, after he had let her through the door and they were walking toward the wood.

"How do you know I was playing last night?"

"I couldn't sleep," she explained, "so I took a wander round the house. I thought a change of atmosphere might do the trick. Counting sheep wasn't any good. I hoped I might meet the wicked Sir Geoffrey in the hall, chains and all, but I didn't even get a sniff of him. I never did believe in your old ghost, David."

"Got as far as the hall, did you?" he said, smiling. "Well, you might have come along to the billiard room when you

knew I was there."

"In my pajamas—at two o'clock in the morning? *David!*" She spoke laughingly, never dreaming he would not laugh too. But to her dismay, he blazed into anger.

"Oh, for God's sake, don't be so absolutely ridiculous," he said sharply. And all at once she understood, realized what her presence here must mean to him, the strain it must be to keep the promise he had made, the mingled feelings of pain and pleasure that were racking him. Until this moment she had never thought how her visit to the Abbey was going to affect him. She had only thought how difficult it was going to be for herself. But she knew now, knew too that absence had not lessened but rather strengthened his love, and that it was not merely overwork and anxiety about his father that had cut those new lines in his face.

At the thought her lip quivered, and a sense of deep unworthiness, of wonder that he could care so much, came to her. No woman in the world was good enough for David, yet he loved her, and she was only making him suffer. And because he was suffering, because the effort to keep a hold over himself was costing him more than perhaps he knew, he had chosen to take seriously what she had uttered in jest.

"I'm not being ridiculous," she said gently, "but you're forgetting, David. I'm grown up now."

"Grown up!" he echoed almost fiercely. "And what in heaven's name does that matter—to you and me? What difference does it make? Do you think, because you're grown up, that I'm not to be trusted alone with you any more, that I can't behave as decently to you at two o'clock in the morning as I would at two o'clock in the afternoon? Do you think me such an unspeakable cad? And I gave you a promise before you came here, didn't I?" There was bitterness in his voice she had never heard before, and the quick glimpse she caught of his face showed it hard and bitter as his tone. If this sort of thing went on, in another minute they'd be really quarreling, she thought miserably, and she wasn't going to quarrel just because David was

being thoroughly masculine and illogical. With a gesture that was half exasperation, half entreaty, she swung round, catching at his arm.

"Oh, David, do stop talking such ghastly rot," she cried impatiently. "You know perfectly well I didn't mean I couldn't trust you. I'm perfectly happy to be with you anywhere, any time, and I'd have come to the billiard room like a shot if I was staying here alone. But suppose someone else had been wandering about the house last night—well, it would have been a bit difficult to explain, even in these days, wouldn't it?"

It was not quite the truth, for when she had fled back to her own room the previous night it was sheer fright that had driven her to cower under the bedclothes while she tried vainly to understand what had come over her. Foot by foot, while she listened to the distant music, she had felt herself being drawn nearer and nearer to the billiard room, until sudden realization of what she was doing had sent her rushing up the stairs again. It was only the music and nothing but that, she had told herself then. And it was only his music, which had always appealed to her, she assured herself now. But truth, or only half truth, it seemed to satisfy Arne, and his face cleared instantly.

"I'm sorry," he said gruffly. "I'm the worst kind of fool. But sometimes—sometimes I wish you were a child still."

"You can't wish it more than I do," she sighed. "I hate being grown up. Everything's different, and everything's just—hateful. But there it is. It can't be helped. Only we mustn't quarrel, David, whatever happens. I know I'm hurting you. I know I oughtn't to have come here, but—"

"Thank God you have come," he broke in. "You've made the Governor happier than he's been for a long time. And you needn't be afraid he'll worry you with any questions you don't want to answer while you're here. I gave him a pretty plain hint before you came that there was one subject you didn't wish mentioned. I told him you wanted to travel for another year or two before you thought about settling down—anywhere. So you'll know what to say if he speaks about it."

She gave his arm a tight squeeze, for speak at the moment she could not. And until they reached the edge of the little wood she kept silent. There, in sight of the old red-brick stables that were built round a quadrangle, she turned in sudden irrelevant question.

"Why do you call Mr. Hoyt, the Sagamore, David?"

"It was the Canadians' name for him," he explained. "His people were among the first of the old pioneers in America, and his great-grandmother was an Indian chief's daughter. He's a throwback in some ways, and the Canadians said that whenever they got to close quarters with the Boche he used to whoop like a Comanche, whatever particular breed of animal that may be. But what made you think of Hoyt, Isma?"

"He's just gone into the yard, with his friend."

An emphatic "Oh, hell!" came from Arne, and he pulled up short, looking at her in dismay. "I'd forgotten all about them," he said with a little laugh, as he started to walk on again. "They can both of them ride anything, and I gave them the run of the stables. I never thought about them coming down this morning. How the dickens shall we get rid of them?" But he got no answer, for while he spoke they passed into the clock-surmounted archway leading to the stables, and Isma was already halfway across the yard, flying with outstretched arms toward a little gray mare that, rearing and kicking, was making strenuous efforts to break away from an exasperated groom.

Standing in the shadow of the archway, Arne saw Isma reach her pet and, snatching at the bridle, thrust the groom aside; saw the little mare, quiet on the instant and whinnying softly, push her sensitive muzzle against the girl's face, against her breast—and knew envy he had never thought to feel. Envy of an animal! Jealous of the Gadfly! Had it even come to that? The damned fool he was!

For a moment he hung back, swearing under his breath, then moved to join Hoyt and the Sidi, who were coming out of the harness room, followed by the old stud groom.

From the mare's neck, when the three men reached her,

Isma lifted a flushed and laughing face. But there were tears in her eyes even while she laughed.

"She knew me at once, David," she exclaimed triumphantly, "and it's nearly eighteen months, bless her. She's the one I loved best," she went on, addressing Hoyt rather than his companion, "and when I had to give up my horses some time ago I couldn't bear to sell her, so David took her to keep for me." Then, as a big rawboned chestnut plunged out of one of the loose-boxes, she added, with a disarming little smile: "I've been looking forward for months to riding her again, so you won't mind if I carry David off now, will you?" and was in the saddle before anyone could help her, laughing and calling to Arne while, for a moment or two, the mare bounced from side to side, frantic with excitement, and then bolted out of the yard.

On his host, struggling with his own excited mount and mumbling awkward excuses, the American bestowed a wink and a sympathetic grin.

"Don't you worry anything about us," he drawled; "you go catch that gray streak of lightning, if you can. My money's on Miss Crichton." And, grinning again, he linked his arm in the Arab's and drew him away to another range of boxes where two more horses stood ready saddled.

The chestnut went through the archway in a clattering rush, and down the long winding west avenue at a gallop, in pursuit of his stable companion. But not until they reached the lodge gate, a mile and a half away, did Arne see Isma, the mare drawn to a standstill, waiting for him. When he drew alongside, she raised mischievous eyes that were like the child's eyes of a few years back.

"Didn't I manage that nicely?" she giggled.

"Depends what you call nice," he said dryly. "I always say it takes a woman to be really rude."

"I wasn't rude," she returned indignantly, "but of course if you don't want to ride alone with me—" Unconscious of it though she was, there was sheer provocation in the look she flung at him, and the perspiration broke out on Arne's forehead as he dug his spurs into his horse,

making him bound furiously.

"Oh, get on, you utter baby," he shouted between the chestnut's plunges. "We'll go up toward the moor and let these beasts stretch themselves."

For years after, Arne remembered that ride, the headlong gallop side by side over the grasslands, the joy of her nearness, and the grace of her slender figure, sitting easily and firmly in the saddle. An hour stolen from heaven, while he tried to forget what stood between them, tried to remember only that she was here, and happy for the moment, as he could see by her face she was. Too soon it came to an end, and they had to turn homeward, dismounting, as they had mounted, at the stables, and walking back to the house by the way they had come.

At the side door by the gunroom Arne put out a detaining arm.

"Are you coming with the guns today?" His voice was eager, but remembrance of what she had overheard the night before made Isma shake her head.

"Not today, I think," she said slowly, tempering her refusal with a smile. "I'll stay with Sir Michael this morning, and try and make myself useful if I can. And this afternoon I want to look up some of the old people here. I wish most awfully I could go and see our own folk at Kings Crichton, but I daren't. It's hard enough for them as it is, and it would only make trouble if it got round I'd been there. And of course I couldn't go to the house. I couldn't meet Digby Crichton; I'd simply blow up with rage if I saw him. You know he's making the most awful changes on the place, and everybody's unhappy. And, oh, David, Henry—our old gamekeeper. Daddy left him an annuity, and before he died he got a promise out of Digby that he'd let Henry stay on in his cottage as long as he lived—he was born in it, and he's over ninety now. Well, when I got back to England last week I found a letter from him, written by his granddaughter, waiting for me, to say that brute Digby had told him he couldn't do with useless people hanging about the place any longer, and that he must get out at the end of the month—and it was well on

to the middle of the month then—as he wanted the cottage for someone who'd be worth his keep. The letter was weeks old, so I telegraphed at once to Digby, and wrote too, begging him to let Henry stay on, or at least let him be until I could make some arrangement for him—and he never even answered my letter or my telegram."

"He wouldn't, the swine," Arne returned disgustedly. "He's made himself a byword in the county already, for incivility, and he's loathed like poison by the lot of us. But don't fret your heart about Henry, Isma. He knew you were away, and he sent me an SOS a few days after the charming Digby gave him notice. I ran over that night and told the old boy he was to come here. We had a cottage vacant, fortunately, but even if there hadn't been one available I'd have found some place for him. So there's no need for you to worry. He's perfectly happy, and wildly excited at the thought of seeing you again. You'll find him in the little lodge at the end of the south avenue, complete with granddaughter and all his belongings.

Tears were standing thick in her eyes when he stopped.

"Oh, David," she murmured, scarcely above a whisper. Then suddenly, reaching up on tiptoe, she kissed him full on the mouth, and was gone before the color came back to his lips again.

Arne never made any reference to that kiss, about which he had no illusions, nor was there any perceptible change in his attitude as the days slipped past. Quiet, uneventful days they were; for, shrinking still from association with old friends and acquaintances, and dreading the gossip she knew must be centered round her, Isma refused all invitations to the neighboring houses, which, like the Abbey, were mostly filled with shooting parties. Riding every morning before breakfast with David, she devoted several hours of each day to Sir Michael, reading and writing letters for him, and for the rest she was content to take long walks and pay visits to the tenants and estate servants who had known her all her life.

With Hoyt, whose breezy geniality made it impossible not to like him, she had become great friends; and even

with the melancholy-eyed Arab, who had ceased to glower at her, she was no longer ill at ease. The feeling of dislike, amounting almost to repugnance, she had experienced at their first meeting, had, on closer acquaintance, changed to indifference that made her scarcely aware if he came into a room or left it. And with much to occupy him, for he spent hours in the billiard room writing innumerable letters, the Sidi seemed as completely oblivious of her as he was of every other woman in the house. But if the business that had brought him and Hoyt to England was not altogether concluded, since the night of Isma's arrival, there had been no more visits to manufacturing centers, and both men had remained quietly at the Abbey. Hoyt, a good shot as well as a good horseman, and not burdened with letter writing, had been a welcome addition to the guns; but the Sidi's only relaxation from his voluminous correspondence was a ride before breakfast, taken with his friend, at an earlier hour even than Isma and Arne.

Nearly three weeks had passed. During that time relays of guests had come and gone until a morning when, besides Isma, there were no visitors left except Hoyt and the Sidi Said, and Lady Merston, who was making her usual long autumn visit to her cousin.

It was mid-October, and a bright, sunny day with a touch of frost in the air. Neither Lady Merston nor Sir Michael had as yet put in an appearance, and in the library, to which she had retreated directly after breakfast, Isma was seated at the writing-table, scanning the columns of *The Times* for the particular items of news she knew would interest Sir Michael, and dropping the paper every other minute to play with the fat old spaniel which lay under the table with his head on her feet. When at last the door opened, his low whine made her turn in expectation of seeing her host. But it was Arne, not his father, who came hurriedly into the room.

"Isma, will you be an angel—"

"Not if it's upstairs," she interrupted.

"It's worse than that," he said, smiling at the old nursery formula.

Isma drew the corner of her mouth down, looking at him mutinously.

"If Cousin Minnie has been trying to get you to make me go to that stuffy lunch at The Chase with her today, I'm not going," she announced in tones of decision. "I told her last night, quite firmly, I wouldn't go."

"It isn't Cousin Minnie. I haven't seen her this morning," he replied; "it's the Sidi." He paused for a moment. "I was wondering," he went on rather hesitatingly, "if you would be very kind and—and look after the little chap today? Hoyt's had a telegram, calling him to London. I've just packed him off to the station. He can't get back till tomorrow, and I've got to put in the whole day over the other side of the county—some infernal business I can't cut. So the Sidi'll be rather at a loose end. It seems he hasn't got any more letters to write, and if you don't take pity on him I don't know what on earth he'll do with himself. He doesn't seem to care for anything except riding, so I thought—perhaps—if you didn't mind—"

"Oh, I don't mind," Isma said airily. "I'll ride with him, if that's all you want. Tell them to give him something thoroughly nasty, that new black beast, if you think it won't break his neck for him; then I shan't have to talk much. I don't know anything about Arabs, except that you mustn't mention their women—and of course that's just what I shall want to speak about. But he'll have to wait till this afternoon. I'm not going to desert Sir Michael for any old Arab."

Glancing at his watch, Arne heaved himself to his feet.

"Righto," he said, nodding. "Fix your own time, and I don't think he'll bore you. He's quite interesting when he once gets going. You're a kind child, and I'm most awfully grateful," he added softly.

"Don't mention it, Mr. Arne," she smirked. "Anything I can do, I'm sure. And the next order, please?"

For a second his eyes met hers, and held them.

"You wouldn't do, if I asked you," he said, very low, and left her looking blankly at the table.

In the last three weeks she had almost forgotten, so easy

had he made it. And now a chance look, a chance word had reawakened all her doubts as to the wisdom of this visit to the Abbey.

High up on the fringe of the wind-swept moor, overlooking the maze of hills and dales through which they had come, Isma and the Sidi sat side by side on a pile of stones that once had been a shepherd's shelter, their horses tethered close behind them.

In the hour and a half that had elasped since they had left the stables, if she had not learned much else concerning her companion, Isma had at least discovered that, with the exception of David Arne, he was the finest horseman she had ever seen. The big black, which in pure mischief she had selected as a suitable mount for him, had given considerable trouble at the start. But from the moment when, without touching the stirrup, he had vaulted into the saddle, his handling of the vicious animal had aroused at first interest and then genuine admiration, while the fact that he was not only a good horseman but obviously a lover of horses had made her feel more sympathetically inclined toward him than a couple of hours ago she would have thought possible.

With two fractious horses to engage their attention, there had been small opportunity for sustained conversation, and few words had passed between them during the ride. But a chance Americanism, which he had had to translate, had led to the information that he had learned English in the United States, where he had been sent as a boy to be educated. Beyond that, however, he had said little of himself, and nothing of his home or family.

And now, sitting silent as he, she was wondering what chance in life had brought this strange Arab, turned businessman, into association with a wealthy dilettante like Hoyt, whose avowed hobby was Roman antiquities. She knew vaguely that there were ruined cities in North Africa as fine as if not finer than those scattered about Europe. Was the Sidi perhaps also interested in the ancient monuments of his country and, with Hoyt, engaged in

excavating some of these old buried towns? What then had brought them to tour the manufacturing districts of England? It all seemed a queer mix-up, she thought. But their business, whatever it might be, was no affair of hers; and, dismissing it from her mind, she turned to the greater interest of her immediate surroundings.

Like all the neighboring country, it was for her a place of memories, yet even the sad thoughts it engendered could not rob it of its charm; and, as she looked slowly from one familiar landmark to another, clear and sharp in the light of the setting sun, a long deep sigh of complete satisfaction came from her.

"It's very beautiful," she said softly. "To me it's the most beautiful view in all the world. But then it's my own country, and of course one always loves one's own country best. Yet I expect it must seem very tame and uninteresting to you. When I was in America I saw a little of the desert north of the Grand Canyon, and I thought it very grand and wonderful, and rather awe-inspiring. It made me feel such a horribly insignificant little atom. But I suppose that desert is tiny, really, compared with yours. I wish you'd tell me something about the Sahara. I don't know anything about it at all. I didn't even know, until I met you, that Arabs were—were—"

"Civilized?" The dry quiet drawl sent the blood into her cheeks.

"I didn't mean that—quite," she stammered.

"Why not?" He smiled, but without looking at her. "It's what all the world thinks; what some of us know ourselves. But are you really interested in my country, Miss Crichton—or are you just being kind to the stranger within your gates?"

"I'm afraid I'm not being kind in the least," she said hastily. "I'm being merely inquisitive. You see, I'm going to travel for a year or two and I want to know about all sorts of places. But I don't want to go where everybody goes. I hate crowds of noisy tourists. They spoiled everything for me in America. When I start on my travels again I want to get right off the beaten track, away from trains

and trippers. But goodness knows how I'm going to manage it. There don't seem to be many peaceful spots left in the world nowadays."

For a moment the Sidi sat very still, staring out over the quiet landscape. Then he laughed, a soft almost breathless little laugh. "If you want to get off the beaten track," he said slowly, "why don't you come to my country? You won't find any trains or trippers there."

Rather abashed at having her vaunted ambition taken quite so literally, and not altogether sure whether he was joking or in earnest, for the suggestion seemed so utterly beyond the bounds of all possibility, Isma laughed too.

"Perhaps I will one of these days, when I've had a bit of experience," she said lightly, "but I've never done any real traveling yet, you know. I mean I've never done anything quite on my own, and for a first attempt I'm afraid that would be rather too big an undertaking."

"Al could fix it for you," he asserted eagerly. But Isma did not notice the eagerness of his tone or see the quick look he threw at her. She was only wondering with inward amusement what Hoyt would have thought of his friend's cool proposal, had he been there to hear. And, conscious all at once that the sun had dipped below the level of the hills, she jumped to her feet and began to untie the Gadfly's bridle.

"Of course it would be simply thrilling," she said with another little laugh, as she slipped the reins back over the mare's neck, "but I'm afraid it's really too far away, much farther into the wilds than I thought of going, in spite of what I said just now. But all the same I do want to know about the Sahara. You must tell me while we ride home, for we can't stay here any longer. We'll have to push along, if we're to get in before dark."

Chapter Three: THE SPELL OF THE DESERT

"FOR THE LAND'S SAKE, CHILD, did nobody ever teach you how to pack?"

Grown used in the last three weeks to the caustic utter-

ances of her eccentric hostess, Isma only laughed as she dropped another armful of clothes into an already bulging suitcase that in some extraordinary way seemed to have become smaller since she left England.

But no pressing or patting would make the additional garments lie flatter, and at last, with another laugh and a comical gesture of despair, she sat back on her heels and looked up to meet the quizzical brown eyes staring at her from over the top of Miss Cassie Hoyt's big horn-rimmed glasses.

"It's pretty awful, isn't it?" she admitted, pushing her hair back from her heated face. "I can't think how Jinny got everything in. She said I wasn't fit to travel alone, and, honestly, if she'd been ten years younger, I think I'd have brought her. She's always done everything for me ever since I was a baby, and it's simply humiliating to find how helpless I am without her. I never had the least idea how much she saved me. That comes of being pampered all one's life," she added, with disgust in her voice that made the elder woman smile.

"Well, I guess some folks have got to be pampered if the rest of the world's to make a living," she drawled, "so I shouldn't let that worry me if I were you, honey. And you don't have to trouble about your packing. Fatima is going down with you to the City of Stones, and she'll fix your clothes and do all you want on the trip."

Isma made incoherent sounds of protest.

"But, Miss Hoyt. I can't take your maid—" she was beginning when the artist's hand dropped on her shoulder, giving it a little shake.

"Now, now, child, don't argue," she snapped, though her eyes were twinkling. "Didn't Al warn you never to argue with me? You just do as you're told for once in your life. You know and Al knows what I think of this crazy trip—for it *is* crazy now there's all this trouble in Morocco—so I'll not say anything more about it. If I could go with you myself, I would, but I can't ride any distance after that fall I had last summer. But Fatima is as strong as a horse, and you can trust her with anything."

"But, Miss Hoyt—" Isma began again urgently.

"I can't pretend I'm not sorry to lose the girl," Miss Hoyt continued, placidly ignoring the interruption. "She's the most intelligent maid I've ever had in this country. But I should have had to part with her soon in any case. She's one of Said's people, and she came to me two years ago for a special purpose, and now that's past and Messaouda wants her back again."

"You're sure?"

"Quite sure. The girl has had orders to rejoin her tribe, so I can't keep her. And she wants to go home. She's devoted to Messaouda."

Lying full length on the floor now, with a leather cushion under her head, Isma made a little grimace.

"Everybody seems to be devoted to Messaouda," she laughed. "I wonder how I'm going to get on with her? it seems so funny to think of staying with an Arab lady. I can't believe she really is an Arab yet. When she wrote asking me to visit her, her letter was just like any ordinary girl's letter. Of course I know she was at school in America, like her brother, but it's all so different from anything I ever heard of Arab women. I always thought they were shut up in harems and never allowed to show their noses in public, but the Sidi told me that his sister rides with him and does what she pleases."

"Messaouda is an exceptional case," replied Miss Hoyt. "She's the kind of woman who would do what she pleased no matter what country she lived in. And, luckily for her, the ben Aissa, like a few other tribes, give their women more liberty than do the majority of Arabs, so she's had scope to use her brains and ability. But even among the women of the ben Aissa, Messaouda is, well—remarkable."

"In what way, remarkable?" asked Isma with a sleepy yawn, for it was late and the day had been a busy one.

But Miss Hoyt pursed her thin lips and shook her head.

"You'll know, soon enough," she said, smiling; "I'm not going to say another word now about Messaouda. I want you to like her, and if I say too much you'll just hate the poor girl before you see her. I've known that to happen

time and again with other people I've wanted to interest in some of my favorites. You just go with an open mind, and form your own opinion when you get to know her. I'll only tell you two things. She's a very lonely girl—her education has made her so—and she's had bad trouble in her life, trouble that has changed her from a happy girl into a very serious woman. So don't be surprised if she isn't always gay and smiling. And now, my dear, it's quite time we stopped chattering and went to bed. We've an early start in the morning," she added briskly.

But though she rose from her chair she seemed in no haste to bid her guest good night, and for some moments she lingered, moving about the room, looking abstractedly at sketches on the walls, at the preparations for travel that lay scattered among the half-Arab, half-European furnishings, and muttering to herself until at last she turned abruptly to Isma who, also risen to her feet, was watching her restless gyrations with an amused smile.

"Do you know anything at all of my brother's interests in this country?" she burst out, and there was something in her voice, something in her keen searching eyes that changed Isma's smile to a look of astonishment.

"His interests?" she repeated blankly. "Do you mean his archeological work? I thought that was his great interest here. The Governor was telling me only last night, when we dined at the Palace, how kind and generous Mr. Hoyt has been in helping with the excavations of some of the old Roman towns. He said his assistance had been most valuable, and that Algeria owed a lot to him. And that reminds me. There's one thing I've been wanting to ask you. Why did you tell me, just before we got to the Palace last night, not to say anything to the Governor or anybody at the dinner about the Sidi, or my visit to the City of Stones? And the other day, when those French people were here to tea, you stopped me when I began talking about the desert, and turned the conversation so that you made them think I'd only come out here to see the excavations. You very nearly landed me in the soup, for I don't know a thing about archeology. Luckily they seemed to know

less, so I wasn't found out. But why did you do it?"

Miss Hoyt's words were no real answer to Isma's question.

"One has to be very careful whom one speaks of in this country," she said evasively.

"But I don't understand how that applies to the Sidi," persisted Isma in growing bewilderment. "He hasn't anything to do with this country. He told me himself that his tribe was outside the French jurisdiction, that they didn't belong to Algeria."

Miss Hoyt shrugged her angular shoulders.

"The confines of Algeria, my dear," she said with a little laugh, "are a vexed question. And Algerian politics—well, they're beyond the comprehension of the ordinary mortal. The war brought upsets here as it did to many other countries, and there are reasons, very sound ones, for not mentioning Said or his people to persons in authority. But those reasons don't affect you, or your visit to the City of Stones. Only it's better, for everyone concerned, that nobody should know you are going there. That's why Al has arranged your trip the way he has, and that's why I'm coming with you as far as the car can take us. Al goes all over the desert hunting for buried cities, and for this trip you're his assistant—if any inquisitive *sous—officier* happens along."

"I see," murmured Isma. But she did not see, and, for some time after Miss Hoyt left her, she stood thinking beside the window she had opened, thrilled with the thought that this journey into the wilds was going to be a greater adventure even than she had contemplated, yet wondering what exactly she was letting herself in for, and whether she ought not to ask for more definite information regarding the Sidi and the ben Aissa tribe than Miss Hoyt had given. Yet why should she bother? The Sagamore, who was apparently on very intimate terms with both the Governor and the Commander-in-Chief of the French forces, seemed perfectly confident about the trip. And until tonight, beyond a vague reference to troubles on the Moroccan border, Miss Hoyt had not suggested any

difficulties. Rather the contrary, for she had spoken with enthusiasm of the strange and remote City of Stones which she herself had visited before the War, and with more than enthusiasm of the beautiful Messaouda who lived like a queen in her father's desert stronghold. And where Miss Hoyt could venture surely she could go.

That there was a mystery somewhere, that they must move in secret, as though they were conspirators, only made it all the more exciting. Not for anything would she turn back now. She was going to the City of Stones no matter what happened—if only to convince David definitely that her affairs were no concern of his. From the very start he had been against this trip, had in turn argued and pleaded and stormed until almost they had quarreled and, both angry with the other, for weeks before she left England she had neither seen nor heard from him. Yet he had come to London to see her off, and for hours after the train steamed out of the station she had been vaguely troubled by the remembrance of his gloomy face.

Her eyes wandered to the writing-table where lay a large square envelope that was to be posted the next morning before she started. And looking she smiled. After the way he had scolded he didn't deserve such a long newsy letter. But there had been so much to tell, and to whom but David could she write all that was in that letter?

With a laugh she caught up an overcoat and, slipping it over her dressing-gown, pushed the French window wider and stepped out on to the balcony that ran the length of the north side of the villa.

During the three weeks of her visit in Algiers the weather had been atrocious; an occasional day of sunshine and calm, but for the rest driving rain and cold biting winds, sweeping down from the snow-clad mountains, that had made thick clothes and furs a necessity. But tonight was fine, windless and clear, and between the trees and tall shrubs in the garden she caught glimpses of the twinkling lights of the town far down the hillside and the silvery gleam of the moon lying like a pathway across the still waters of the Mediterranean.

By night Algiers was fairyland; but in the revealing light of day its ever-growing suburbs, its stark and ugly factory buildings, its prisonlike tenement houses, in the Spanish quarter, and the startling naked patches on the wooded hills that had been stripped to give room for more and more villas, had been a disappointment. A purely French town, with little or nothing of the Orient left. And of the Arabs who remained, all, with few exceptions, were squalid and debased, ruined by contact with civilization, a shiftless, sad-eyed remnant that made her understand why the Sidi had talked so bitterly of foreign influence and domination. Only in the desert, he had said, were the true Arabs to be found now, and earnestly he had begged her not to judge his race by the specimens she saw in the northern towns. And, difficult though it had been, she had determined not to be swayed by what she had seen so far but to reserve judgment until she made acquaintance with the desert dwellers who still retained their freedom and self-respect.

Yet, in spite of the bad weather, in spite of many illusions shattered, the three weeks had been happy and interesting ones; and no people in the world—she told herself now—could have been kinder or more hospitable than the Hoyts. A complete stranger, from the moment of her arrival, when the Sagamore, meeting her on the quay and waiting her past a smiling and obsequious custom's house officer, had bestowed her and her belongings in an enormous limousine that had rushed her through crowded streets at an appalling speed, she had been made to feel one of the family. And for both Hoyt and his sister she had come to have a regard she gave to few. Only three weeks she had been their guest, yet she seemed to know them so well. Hoyt, for all his forty-odd years, and a wider and most diverse experience of life, at heart merely a big overgrown schoolboy, simple in his own tastes but lavish as only one who has never had to consider money can be in his expenditure on others; and Cassie, big-hearted and lovable, in spite of her eccentricities and brusqueness of speech. An odd pair, as different the one from the other

as chalk from cheese, yet one in their kindness and almost extravagant generosity, and devoted as Isma had not known brother and sister could be. They had been like a brother and sister to her, and whether this trip was a success or not she would always be grateful to them, always remember their frank and lavish hospitality.

The fresh air had banished her sleepiness, and, drawing her coat closer round her, she moved noiselessly to the end of the balcony, where a break in the trees gave a more uninterrupted view. The noisy clanging of the trams was stilled now, only the occasional shriek of a motor horn piercing the deep quiet of the night. And reveling in the beauty of the scene spread out before her, breathing the strange sweet smells that rose in waves from the garden, she was idly trying to count the riding-lights in the distant harbor when she heard a footfall on the tiled veranda beneath and, almost under her feet, Cassie Hoyt's voice, low pitched but vehement: "—it's taking a big chance, and if anything happens to that girl—"

Then, impatiently, the deeper tones of Hoyt, evidently just returned from the Military Club, where he had gone after dinner: "Oh, shucks, Cassie, it's perfectly safe. Nothing's going to happen. I've told you a hundred times."

"And that stuff you've got stowed in the bottom of the car?"

"That's for the future. It can't be used yet. Said won't be ready to move for a year at least. I'm only working it down because Ishak has got cold feet and don't like handling it. And nobody's going to interfere with the car. The General knows all about that false bottom. He's seen it filled too often with truck from the excavations to worry about it now. I don't know what's come to you, Cassie. It's not like you to be nervous when there's no need. I tell you I've got 'em all fooled. I've got everybody that matters in this darned country eating out of my hand by now and—"

"You're so mighty pleased with yourself you'll grow careless and get tripped up one of these days," was the acid rejoinder. But only a soft laugh came from Hoyt, and a moment after, the sound of a window being closed.

Open-mouthed, wide-eyed, her hands gripping the balcony rail, Isma stood staring at the harbor she no longer saw. Should she have listened when the Hoyts thought her in bed and asleep? Certainly she had never been meant to hear. Yet, after all, it was she who was concerned, she who would be involved in—what? That was just the point. What was the Hoyts', or more particularly the Sagamore's, real business in this country? Was his archeological work only a blind, a means to some very different end—and if so, what end? A regular old filibuster, always out for a scrap, David had said. And Hoyt himself, a few minutes ago, with a boy's chuckle: *I tell you I've got 'em all fooled.*

Isma drew a quick breath. And suddenly she found herself shaking from head to foot, not with fear but from sheer excitement. Always she had longed for adventure, and adventure undreamed of was ahead of her now. The long journey across the desert had seemed wonderful enough to contemplate, but now, now— If she could only open that letter to David and give him the least little hint of the thrills she anticipated. But that was out of the question. Not even David must know what she had not been meant to hear. And she might be going too far in her suppositions, letting imagination run away with her.

The Sidi's country was beyond the French border, he had said so distinctly, and the Sagamore's purpose might have nothing to do with the French and Algeria. But the *stuff* in the car Cassie was nervous about; the stuff Ishak, whoever he might be, didn't like handling? Well, she wasn't supposed to know anything about that, and it wasn't her business what Hoyt chose to take out or bring into the country. She was only a tourist, traveling for amusement, with the British Government behind her if anything went wrong; and the best thing she could do was to try and forget what had passed between Hoyt and his sister.

But to try was not to achieve, and several times during the night, too excited to sleep much, her mind was busy with the scraps of conversation she had overheard.

Yet when a smiling Fatima woke her the next morning

and, quickly dressed, she sat out on the balcony eating her early breakfast in the brilliant sunshine that seemed a good omen for the journey, it was difficult quite to recapture the thrill of the previous night, to believe that all she had heard was not part of a highly imaginative dream. It was so improbable. And it suggested too something from which she shrank; treachery and double-dealing she could not bring herself to associate with her frank, outspoken host. No matter whom Hoyt was working for, it could not be against the French, whose hospitality he had enjoyed for years, and in aid of whose scientific researches he had poured out money like water. Never would she believe anything so vile of a man she had come to like and respect. There was something behind it all, something that would no doubt be cleared up when they got to their journey's end, and then she would be able to laugh at the stupid suspicions that had made her feel so uncomfortable.

And more than stupid she felt those suspicions when she went down to the front door to be met by the Hoyts' cheery greetings and to find with them several French officers, and one or two well-known scientists from Paris, who had come to see the start of the expedition.

Yet while she chatted and laughed with the visitors, again and again her eyes kept wandering to the big closed car, one she had not seen before, wondering what lay concealed in the deep flooring, which, skillfully built and screened by the running-boards, was scarcely noticeable from the outside.

Among the officers was a cavalry captain who was also, so the Hoyts had affirmed, a secret member of the Intelligence department. What if he were here for other reasons than mere interest and friendship? What if he suddenly demanded an inspection of the car and its contents? Her breath came faster as she tried to imagine the scene that might follow.

But Captain Dupont, who had been an assiduous caller at the villa ever since her arrival, had eyes apparently for nothing and nobody but herself. And when the time came,

it was he who, with many bows and reiterated expressions of regret at her departure, handed her into the car and arranged her personal belongings close to her feet on the incriminating floor.

Miss Hoyt had already taken her seat; and in front, smiling her usual inscrutable little smile, Fatima sat beside the Arab chauffeur. Only Hoyt remained, exchanging compliments and felicitations, until, with a last handshake all round and a fervent embrace from one of the enthusiastic scientists, he too climbed in, and the car, slipping swiftly down the drive, shot out into the steep main road that winds from Mustapha to the town.

It was still very early, but already there was traffic on the road, motors filled with businessmen rushing to their offices, and an unending stream of electric trams, crowded with Europeans and Arabs, while horse drays and donkey carts innumerable wandered at will in total disregard of all police regulations. Near the Governor's Summer Palace the car, with many others, was held up for some time to give passage to a detachment of Arab cavalry, lean, swarthy faced men in picturesque scarlet burnooses, who sat their restless horses like centaurs. And watching him, as he waved a smiling greeting to the officer in command, Isma saw an odd look come into Hoyt's keen eyes. But it was gone in a moment, and only the smile remained as he turned to her with a backward jerk of the head.

"Good chaps, those," he commented. "Pity they get so little real work to do." Again she thought of what might be under her feet, and an almost overwhelming impulse came to blurt out what she had overheard and ask for some definite reassurance. But again she hesitated. After all the kindness she had received, such a question seemed impossible, and she had nothing really to go on except chance words she might have misunderstood. Better say nothing than make a perfectly awful bloomer she would always regret. Determined to put everything out of her mind but the pleasure of the moment, she leaned back against the soft cushions and fixed her attention on the congested street until they reached the Oran road.

The few excursions Isma had already taken, very few owing to the bad weather, had lain in the opposite direction, so from now on the way was new to her. A tame way she thought at first, as they passed rapidly between endless vineyards and mile after mile of palm-screened market gardens, with only an occasional glimpse of the sea to break the monotony. And in the car conversation had languished. Up since daybreak, Miss Hoyt was already peacefully asleep; while the Sagamore, for once without the perpetual cigar between his lips, was completely absorbed in the large-scale map he was studying.

Tiring at last of the uninteresting scenery, and sleepy herself after a broken night, Isma took off her hat and proceeded to follow Cassie's example.

But it was only that first hour that Isma found tedious. In the five days that followed, every succeeding moment was full of attraction, of wonder and delight.

After the first day they had avoided main routes, keeping to smaller and less frequented roads, which, ill cared for and bumpy, had reduced the speed of the car.

The way had led past farms and vineyards, all owned or leased by Frenchmen, cultivated country that might, from the buildings and storehouses, have been France itself. Two nights they had spent in small villages, in stuffy little inns.

Then had come wilder, less populated country, tracts of waste land with a few sheep and camels grazing, and smaller unprosperous looking farms that were tended almost entirely by Arabs, sullen, morose-appearing men of few words. Here there had been no accommodation of any kind, and they had had to spend the night in the car. But every hour the scenery grew grander, rocky defiles winding through unexpected chains of mountains, more what Isma had imagined Northern Algeria would be. And the last two days, clear of the mountains and running southward along a hard-beaten track, with real desert stretching on either side, telegraph poles the only indication of civilization and an occasional nomad's camp the

only sign of human life, her excitement had risen to fever pitch.

Even the bare discomfort of the bordj where they had slept last night, on rugs and cushions taken from the car, had not damped her enthusiasm. It was merely a novel experience she had thoroughly enjoyed. In the dusk of evening, when they reached it, the grim and desolate-looking little caravanserai, tenantless and half fallen into ruins, had appeared a place of subtle mystery, of haunting silence that stirred her to fantastic imaginings—until Hoyt's voice, calling to her to help him with the picnic supper, had brought her suddenly back to actualities again. And in the rush that followed there had been no time to dream. Wanting eagerly to do her share, but utterly ignorant of the first principles of practical camping, more than ever had she realized her own limitations as she watched Cassie superintend the cleaning and arranging of the room they were to occupy, and the Sagamore's efficiency with a frying-pan. The meal that resulted, served on the ground and eaten by candlelight, had seemed the most delicious she had ever tasted, and a determination to learn what the Hoyts performed so easily had been her last thought when, later, she lay wrapped in her blankets on the hard cement floor.

In the bright light of the sun next morning the bordj, no longer mysterious, looked just what it was, a squalid little barrack, fouled with dirt and dust; and Isma's sensitive lip curled with disgust when she saw fully revealed what the gloom of the previous evening had effectually concealed. But she kept her disgust to herself. She wasn't going to have Hoyt laugh at her again for a tenderfoot, as he had last night when she burned the hot milk for the coffee, in her efforts to make herself useful.

They had left the bordj shortly after sunrise. All day the car had followed the same caravan route, winding steadily across undulating desert which, dotted with sparse shrubs and camel thorn, reached as far as eye could see. And all day, in all that great waste they had seemed to be alone. In the morning, far off, they had sighted camels grazing.

But no camelherd, not even a solitary nomad, had shown himself. Hoyt's assurance that the beggars were there if they'd only let you see them Isma did not attempt to dispute. He knew and she didn't, and tenderfoot still rankled.

A halt by the roadside at midday for lunch, and the car had resumed its journey. It was some hours later when Isma, alone with her thoughts, for both the Hoyts were sleeping, thought she saw some change in the unvarying outlook—a faint smudge in the distance that might be a cloud or the outline of a low-lying hill. For long she stared at it, peering until her eyes ached, before she satisfied herself that the bump on the skyline was really solid earth. A few moments more, and through the glass screen, she saw the Arab chauffeur point and Fatima in her turn crane forward to look. Nearer it came and nearer, flattening and lengthening as they approached, a definite hill, squat and truncated, with a line of other hills beyond slowly coming into view. And, looking, Isma found her attention suddenly caught by a speck by the roadside.

Still a long way off, she could make nothing of it, and reached for her field glasses. Then she saw, and a little thrill ran through her. A solitary Arab mounted on a camel, whether moving or stationary she could not yet determine. How tiny he looked, and how terribly alone. An atom amidst inconceivable space. The memory of a minute nautilus drifting its single way across the Caribbean Sea came to make her smile, so similar did they appear in their absolute solitude. Yet every moment the Arab and his mount were growing bigger. Soon she could distinguish them closely, without help from her glasses, man and beast alike motionless, waiting. Again she saw the chauffeur point and say something, and Fatima's smile as she answered.

Then Hoyt woke, broad awake on the instant, to rouse his sister and then turn to Isma with a nod of the head.

"That's Doud, my head camelman, and the end of lazy travel for you and me," he said, grinning, and, opening the window, waved to the Arab, who wheeled his beast and began to pace slowly back toward the low line of hills

less than a quarter of a mile away.

Isma's breath came faster. Until now, in spite of the strangeness of her surroundings, the journey had seemed almost commonplace. Not even the wandering nomads who now and then had crossed their path had made her quite realize that soon she too would be a wanderer on the face of this great vastness, her back turned to civilization as theirs was, living as they did.

She had not been able to grasp the fact that the start had really been made. But now, quite suddenly, she knew that she was up against it, that the great adventure she had dreamed of so long was actually imminent. By this time tomorrow Miss Hoyt and the luxurious car—everything that stood for comfort and ease—would be miles distant, and she on her way toward the unknown, ignorant of what lay before her, her very life in the hands of a man who was almost a stranger.

But that was just the joy of it all. Now, at least, she would have a chance to prove of what stuff she was made. The long journey, with whatever might befall, was going to be a test, a trial of nerve and endurance that had never come her way before. And she was going to make good, going to show David just how independent she was, how capable of taking care of herself.

Prehistoric in some of his notions, poor old David, in spite of the War and the changes caused by the War. Sheltered womanhood, and all that sort of tripe. Ghastly in these days. And yet, after all, rather nice—up to a point. And men saw further than women; their judgments were generally more unbiased. Perhaps David's views weren't really so archaic when all was said. Perhaps, in the long run, it was just as well some men thought as he did—for the womenfolk dependent on them. But that didn't apply to her. She wasn't dependent on any man, and David had no manner of right to legislate for her. And what on earth had made her think of David and his objections now? Impatiently she thrust her head out of the window as the car swung off the beaten track in the wake of the camel.

Bumping and lurching over the hard gravelly surface

that ground and squeaked under the tires, they crept forward to the base of the low hill, skirting it until a break in the rock face showed a tiny dry ravine. Through this, slower and more cautiously, and round a right-angled turn into a wider and less gloomy little valley, where a group of Arabs stood clustered near several small, low-pitched tents of dark striped material, which at first glance Isma took to be a nomad encampment.

It had never occurred to her to ask what the equipment of the expedition was to be, and for the last few days she had amused herself visioning spacious bell tents, of glistening whiteness, and filled with every modern camp convenience, as her temporary home each night. But the forward surge of the waiting Arabs, the salaaming and excited greetings as she followed the Hoyts out of the car, and the sight of her own belongings being carried into one of the picturesque little *guitounes* made her quickly realize that this was their own camp, and in what manner she was to be housed during the remainder of the trip.

The contrast between what she had imagined and what she saw made her smile as, hands in her coat pockets and cigarette in mouth, she stood sniffing the keen dry air that seemed so invigorating after the close stuffiness of the car, watching the white-clad figures moving about in bustling activity that yet had order and method behind it, and listening, with a slightly envious feeling, to the Hoyts' ready flow of fluent Arabic, as they chatted with this man and another, until a wizened little Arab in spotless drapery suddenly emerged, smiling and salaaming, from behind the largest tent, and Miss Hoyt turned and beckoned to her.

"Tea time, honey," she called, "and I guess you're wanting it every bit as much as I am. This is Mohammed, Al's famous *cordon bleu.* He's a dandy cook, and he'll just break his heart if you don't appreciate all the good things he's going to give you on this trip. Cooking is a kind of religion with him, and the other men say he says his prayers to his pots and pans," she added laughing, and led the way to the tent.

Inside, at its highest point, Isma could just stand upright; but the Sagamore, who followed close behind her, had to bend his tall head, and subsided immediately onto the thick rug that covered the ground. "Never walk when you can ride. Never stand when you can sit," he quoted gaily. "How do you like our mess tent, Miss Crichton?"

Isma looked at the rug, which even she knew was almost priceless, at the piles of embroidered leather cushions, and the dainty tea appointments set on a big brass tray.

"I think it's all perfectly lovely," she said, smiling, "and I never felt so hungry in my life."

"Sure you're not disappointed?" Hoyt asked with a twinkle. "I've been afraid you were expecting a swell chief's tent, with Parisian furniture, and hot and cold running water in the back premises."

It was so nearly the truth that the color flamed in Isma's cheeks, but before she could think of a suitable retort Miss Hoyt's caustic voice came sharply: "Don't you listen to him, honey. He can't help teasing. He's made that way. Give the child her tea, Al, and be useful if you can't be ornamental."

But no sisterly snubbing could stop Hoyt's flow of bantering conversation. In contrast to the unusual silence he had maintained ever since they left Algiers, this evening it seemed as if some weight had been lifted from his mind, and he was at his most schoolboyish. They had just finished, and Isma was ashamed to remember how many times her cup had been refilled, when a sudden noise outside, shouts and whistles mingled with deep roarings and snarlings, made her turn startled eyes on her companions.

"What on earth is that?"

But Hoyt was gesticulating vigorously, a warning finger on his lips. "Ssh," he breathed, "lions!"

"But I didn't know—" Isma stopped abruptly and colored again, for she saw he was laughing. And once more Miss Hoyt came to her aid.

"Now, Al, that's too bad," she expostulated, shaking her head at him but smiling too in spite of herself. "How should the poor child know? It's the camels, my dear,"

she went on to Isma; "they're being driven in for the night. Come along and see them. And just smack Al's head for me as you pass, will you? He's altogether too fresh this evening."

It was Isma's first close view of the ungainly, bad-tempered creatures that were to become so familiar to her; and, excited and amused, she watched the long string drift with lengthy stride and haughty aloofness past the tents, laughing, till the tears came, at the pandemonium and confusion, as now one and then another stubborn beast doubled back and bolted for freedom, pursued by their swift-footed attendants, and fleeing ignominiously herself to the shelter of the mess tent when one particularly large, wild-eyed brute charged open-mouthed in her direction, with two Arabs hanging on to the cord knotted round his flanks. In and out among the tents, this way and that he flung them, cruel jaws snapping as they leaped for his head, fighting and bellowing until at last they got him down. Then, with one front leg bent under and lashed securely, he rose again with a grunt, to hobble unwillingly and disgustedly back to the lines where the other camels now lay in disdainful silence chewing the cud. The performance over, Isma wiped a heated forehead, and whistled.

"Gosh, is that what I've got to ride?"

"Not that one," laughed Hoyt; "that's my little pet. I've something sweeter-tempered in store for you. But old Beelzebub's not a bad sort, once you're up on his back. Bite my nose off as soon as look at it, if he got the chance, but he'd never fail me on a march. He'd die on his legs sooner. But they're all like that, more or less. You can't ever get really friendly with a camel, not like you can with a horse. They're grouchy beasts, no matter how you handle them. And now, young lady, what would you like to do? Go and see your sleeping-tent, or take a run up the hill with me and watch the sunset? Cassie's busy with Mohammed. Guess she's looking over his store list, so we'll leave her to it. She's a fine housekeeper—when she happens to remember. You'd rather walk? Then come right along." With

another boyish laugh he motioned toward the hillside; and, glad of the opportunity to stretch her cramped limbs, Isma toiled after him up the steep slope until, panting, she reached the summit.

For a few moments she stood dumb, unable to speak. Never in her life had she seen so wide an outlook; never, even at sea, had the sense of limitless space been so forcibly conveyed to her. And the calm stillness that hung over everything! Stillness that could be felt. Almost was she afraid, in that tremendous silence, even to whisper. Tears in her eyes, her lips quivering with emotion she hardly understood, she looked and looked, fascinated and absorbed. Sharp and clear in the evening light lay the desert, stretching for miles, until sand and sky seemed to meet and mingle indivisibly, like a great untroubled ocean rolling on without end and forever. Not a living thing in sight, not a mark of any kind to break the horizon. And in the west the glory of the setting sun, a ball of fire, flaming against the deep blue of the sky, going down in a riot of crimson and gold.

So must the Gates of Heaven look, she thought, and turned to the man who stood silent as she at her side.

"I never could have imagined anything so wonderful."

"Wait till you get to the City of Stones," he said softly, "till you see a sunset there, from the minaret at the top of the rock. Then you'll have seen something worth seeing, little lady."

While he spoke a look she had never seen before, a look half sad, half yearning, came into his eyes, and with a smothered sigh he turned his back on the sinking sun and began to retrace his steps to the little valley below. But the next moment he was joking again, and, following him, Isma wondered if that look, so strange and unexpected, had existed only in her own imagination. So had she seen David look at her, many times. But it was not she who, just now, had brought that expression into Hoyt's eyes. Though he had looked straight at her, his gaze had seemed to go through and beyond her to something or somebody only he could see, so fixed and distant had it

been. Was there still another side to the character of this queer American, another mystery to be unraveled, she wondered. And if there was? She hadn't come to the desert to mix herself up with other people's secrets, much less to hunt for sentiment. She had done with that, had left it in England with David. And there with him, poor old faithful David, it could rest.

Darker in the valley than on the hilltop, and every moment growing darker. In the camp silence reigned. Behind the mess tent a fire was burning, and at a little distance some of the men knelt at their evening prayer. The rest were out of sight, as far as Isma could see, and of Miss Hoyt there were no signs.

The Sagamore had left her with a muttered reference to the car. So, longing for a wash, Isma went to her own little tent.

The two rolls of bedding—for Cassie was to share the tent tonight—and a canvas bucket and washbasin seemed to take up all available space when she crept in, to find Fatima, more animated than she had ever seen her, waiting to unpack and arrange the few simple necessaries she required. Yet even before she was ready for dinner, the tent appeared to have grown larger and more accommodating. So too the mess tent when, an hour later, she rejoined the Hoyts. Easier this time to sit cross-legged and Arab fashion. Reveling in the utter strangeness of everything, amazed at the elaborate and excellent dinner that Mohammed brought proudly, course by course, she chattered without stopping, until, plates and dishes cleared away, at last they sat over coffee and cigarettes in the wide open door of the tent.

Close by a small fire of brushwood had been lit, making the darkness beyond more intense. And the mystery of the African night, more apparent here than she had yet felt it, the marvel of the brilliant stars blazing overhead, the feeling of total isolation from the world that gradually stole over her, brought little by little a sensation of lassitude and dreaminess that checked her eager flow of talk. Already the spell of the desert had gripped

her and, happier than she had been for years, too utterly content to think beyond the moment, she lay staring into the heart of the fire, scarcely listening to the others' conversation; and soon they too relapsed into silence.

For long, not a voice, not a movement broke the intense stillness, and in the hush that had settled over the camp—for even the camels had ceased to complain—it seemed as if all nature was asleep.

Then somewhere near in the hills an owl hooted, and far off in the distance echoed the plaintive cry of its mate; and, as though its weird note had been a signal, from the men's quarters came the thin reedy pipe of a native flute. Illusive, almost tuneless, yet haunting and compelling, the simple little refrain rose and fell, barbaric music old as the desert itself and sad with the melancholy of endless ages. For a few minutes only it trembled on the night air. Then, abruptly as it had risen it died away, lost in the sighing of the soft wind that had suddenly sprung up and was drifting through the valley, stirring the sand to faint whisperings.

The fire was low now, so, too, the one by the cook tent, round which the men were seated. Only Hoyt's cigar still glowed red in the darkness.

Curled on the thick rug, Isma was more than half asleep when Miss Hoyt's voice in her ear made her start up, yawning and rubbing her eyes.

"Oh, I wasn't snoring, was I?"

Hoyt's laugh was answer enough, and Miss Hoyt, with unusual demonstrativeness, put an arm round her and gave her an affectionate little hug.

"Not so as you'd notice it," she chuckled, "but you'll sleep easier in your bed, honey. Here's your electric torch, and I'll give you ten minutes to get tucked up. It's cramped quarters over there for two."

The wind had freshened, but there was no other sound to be heard when Isma stepped out into the pitch blackness, her torch throwing a long beam before her as she walked; and alone, for absolutely alone at that moment she seemed to be, the wonder and enchantment of the

night held her enthralled. More marvelous, more alluring even than the American desert was this great African waste dormant under the blazing stars; so close they looked, and so big and bright. Angels' eyes, peeping, Jinny used to tell her. But no stars she had ever seen could compare with these. If she could only climb to the hilltop again and see them from there, thousands more than she could see from where she stood.

Excitement had banished sleepiness, and, surrendering to inexplicable impulse, a sudden longing came to do what fancy had put into her mind, and then from the hilltop to wander on and on in the black night that was drawing her like a magnet. If she only could! But it wasn't possible. Regretfully she admitted it. Goodness only knew who or what lurked outside this quiet little valley where the camp lay hidden. Prowling, she might meet more than she bargained for—and this was Hoyt's caravan, not hers—a caravan she felt convinced held a mystery that might not be inquired into. And she hadn't time to wander anyhow, for in ten minutes Cassie would be coming.

With one last look at the radiance overhead, she hurried to her tent. No light shone through the thick matting, but, creeping under the lowered entrance flap, she found the interior dimly lit by a shaded candle set on a cushion between the two blanket-covered mattresses.

On her own bed she sat down to take off her shoes, amusement dancing in her eyes as she glanced round her tiny abode. Cramped quarters was putting it mildly, she reflected, but there was plenty of room really, when one got used to it. One could get used to anything in time, even creepy-crawlies. And with a grimace she brought her shoe down smartly on the back of a too-inquiring scavenger beetle that was making frantic efforts to climb on to the mattress. She had seen them in the mess tent, shiny black horrors, penetrating in dozens in search of the food they scented. But here, on a bed that was only a few inches off the ground, perhaps running over her face in the darkness! Well, at least she wouldn't see them. That

was one comfort.

With another grimace, and keeping a watchful eye for relatives of the deceased, she began to undress. She was in her pajamas, about to slip between the blankets, and wondering why Miss Hoyt did not come, for the ten minutes had become nearer twenty, when a sound brought her to rigid attention, listening intently. Quite close to the tent she heard it—the protesting snarls of camels, unwilling to kneel, mingled with men's voices murmuring indistinctly, and, clear above the others, Hoyt's deep tones, unmistakable, even though she could not distinguish his words or what language he was speaking.

Her heart beat quicker. What was happening out there in the darkness, and so late at night? Were some of the men leaving the camp, or were some late comers just arriving? But it couldn't be the last. The Sagamore had told her during dinner, when she asked the question, that all the men belonging to the caravan were here. Was it then another caravan, taking a short cut through the hills, who had halted perhaps to ask for food, or perhaps only from mere curiosity? Or was it—Captain Dupont? For a moment she stood scarcely breathing, straining her ears to listen, while for the hundredth time she wished fervently she had never gone out to the balcony that last night in Algiers. But she had gone; and she hated the half knowledge which, forgotten for the last few days, now returned to reawaken suspicion she had hoped was ended.

Determined to know what was passing she caught up her coat. The voices still came from the back of the tent, and slipping out she stood up to look.

By the light of an acetylene flare that Mohammed was holding, she saw Doud and a few of the other men whom she recognized standing beside two kneeling camels, and near them Hoyt talking to two strange Arabs who looked like nomads.

In the relief she felt Isma nearly laughed out loud. Only nomads. And she had thought— In sudden anger at herself she ground her heel deep into the soft sand. What she had thought was not nice to remember, and,

if she was going to let her idiotic imagination run away with her like this every time anyone dropped into camp, her nerves would be in a queer state when she reached her journey's end. Better mind her own business for the future, and not go prying into affairs that were no concern of hers.

Without waiting to see the strangers go, she wriggled back into the tent, and was asleep before Miss Hoyt crept in a few minutes later.

Chapter Four: NEAR DISASTER

THE GORGE SEEMED NEVER-ENDING.

Hemmed in on either side by tall cliffs that rose sheer and stark for a couple of hundred feet or more, the caravan was slowly and painfully following the tortuous windings of a dry river bed. Stumbling continually, picking a zigzag course over and around boulders and masses of debris, the baggage camels lurched one behind the other in a strung-out line, refusing often for minutes at a time to move, and groaning dismally as the men, sometimes by main force, drove them forward relentlessly.

Close behind the caravan, dismounted and walking beside Hoyt, for a toss here meant almost the certainty of a broken limb, Isma was trying to keep her eyes from the red stains on the rocks and stones under her feet. For the four previous days their way had led across the high hamada, a vast tableland of dreary bleakness which, seeming to stretch flat and unbroken for miles, had yet been slit and gashed with innumerable deep chasms that they had traversed with difficulty.

Just before reaching the hamada the weather had changed, intense heat and brilliant sunshine giving place to a cloudy sky and cold dampness that had chilled them all. And during the four-day march across the elevated tableland, a piercing wind had blown without ceasing. With shoulders hunched against the blast, their heads muffled in their burnooses, the men had plodded on in silence, for even a shouted word had been swept away and

lost in the fierce howling of the gale. And wrapped in every coat she possessed, and still shivering, Isma had found it hard to believe that she was in the same country where so short a time before she had been grilling in almost tropical heat and longing for a cloud to cover the burning sun.

But for her the worst part of the hamada had been the cruel unyielding rock that had cut the soft pads of the camels. Pushed to their utmost speed on the plateau, the weary beasts were in no condition to face the rough gully that was the only route by which they could reach the river bed.

Bad going for the human members of the party, for the camels the steep descent had been nearly impossible. Yet they had had to make it, and, compelled to proceed in slithering rushes as the loose ground gave under them, the sharp, lavalike deposit had further lacerated their torn feet. And now, footsore and weary herself, Isma saw with a sick feeling of helplessness the bloodstains they left in their path.

In the weeks that had passed since the real journey began, she had learned to appreciate the unfailing strength and endurance of the surly, stubborn beasts on whom her life, and the lives of those with her, depended. Cross-grained and cantankerous, devoid of any spark of affection or even good feeling, they were yet invested with a certain dignity, a suggestion of assured self-confidence that commanded respect if it did not inspire liking. From morning until night they marched, grumbling and complaining, but always steadfastly pushing on, faithful to the day's work. Even her riding camel was unfriendly and aloof as it had been at the start, and she had long since given up hope that it would ever be otherwise. But compassion for it and its suffering fellows she did feel, and the knowledge that she was powerless to help them seemed to augment her own weariness.

Hunger too was adding to her distress. Starting every morning with the dawn, until today they had invariably made a two-hour halt at midday for lunch and a short

sleep. But today there had been no halt. Without any explanation, and Isma had not asked for one, Hoyt and the head camelman, Doud, had kept the caravan steadily on the move hour after hour, and now, three o'clock by her watch, she was beginning to feel the need of food acutely. But though her head and every nerve in her body was aching she said no word of complaint. She knew without having to be told that there must be some good cause for this departure from precedent for, though the men's inscrutable faces told nothing, Hoyt's face was grave, and often he glanced up at the dull sky and then behind him, as if he were watching for something; and she was determined not to add to his evident uneasiness by grumbles that would not help her and only increase his worries. As long as she could stay on her feet she would keep going.

Never in her wildest dreams had she imagined how strenuous the journey across the desert would be, how the jogging of her camel, until she had learned the trick of riding him, was to shake and rend her, and in what agony of weariness she would crawl to her little tent each night, to sleep for what seemed only a moment, and then be forced to rise and face another grueling march. Yet every succeeding day she had found it easier. Her muscles hardened and her body adapted to the strain, she was able to do a ten-hour day in the saddle and be only healthily tired at the end of it.

But with no rest the previous night, for the bitter cold on the hamada and the tearing wind threatening every minute to wrench the tents from their fastenings had made sleep impossible, and leg-weary from miles of rough scrambling, this was the worst day she had experienced. And now, stiff and sore from a fall in the gully, sheer pride alone kept her doggedly tramping at Hoyt's side.

She was hampering them enough as it was, she went on reminding herself. It was only for her that the stages were limited to ten hours. Hoyt and his men she knew were accustomed to far longer marches, and marches that did not include a halt in the middle of the day. They were sparing her all they could, and it was up to her in this unusual

circumstance to do her utmost not to be a clog to them. The windings of the river bed prevented any distant view. Each turn and twist showed the same tall cliffs shutting out sight of what lay beyond.

A little sigh she could not suppress escaped her as she looked up at them. They might terminate abruptly at any moment, or stretch still for miles. She tried not to think of that possibility and, her eyes fixed hopefully on the next turn which the leading camels had almost reached, tripped over a dead tree stump wedged between two boulders and fell heavily against Hoyt.

"Hold up, little lady," he exclaimed; "not twisted your ankle, have you?"

The support of the strong arm round her made her realize more than ever how nearly done she was, and to her horror she felt childish tears rising in her eyes. Disgusted with herself, she winked them back and shook her head, forcing a smile as she met his anxious gaze.

"No—I don't think so," she said, wiggling her foot gingerly; "only jarred it. It was stupid of me. I wasn't looking where I was going."

"Are you telling me the truth?" he asked, looking at her doubtfully; "because if you're not I won't let you walk another step. Little injuries have a way of growing into big ones if they're not seen to right off, and I can't have you going lame, not at this stage of the proceedings. You're the gamest little kid ever, and I'm taking my hat off to you every day, but I'm not going to let you do any damn foolishness. Better let me have a look at that foot."

The unexpected praise was like a tonic, and vigorously she shook her head again.

"It's quite all right," she protested. "Cross my heart and wish I may die, as your sister says," she added with a little laugh as she drew away from him. Then, with a quick glance: "I didn't know you were a doctor, among your other activities."

Hoyt looked up at the sky and then behind him, as he had done so often during the day.

"I'm not qualified," he returned, shrugging his shoul-

ders, "but I know quite a bit. Have to—in my trade."

"Your trade?" Isma repeated wonderingly.

"Excavations," he said shortly. "My boys get hurt sometimes. I've had to learn how to patch them up. But, look! There's Doud waving. I guess that means we've come to the end of this darned ditch, and I reckon I'm not sorry. I don't know this trail. Usually I come another way. But this time I had reasons for changing my route." Putting his hands to his mouth he shouted something in Arabic to the men in front and, as an answering shout echoed down the ravine, turned to Isma with a nod of reassurance. "Five minutes and we'll be out of it, and then you won't have to walk any more. I've just hated to keep you pushing on so long without a rest, but needs must when the devil drives. I just daren't stop yet awhile, not here in this river bed and with that sky overhead."

What exactly he meant Isma could not guess, but she was too tired to care about whys and wherefores. At the moment the only thing she wanted was to get on her camel again and not have to drag weary feet that felt as though they were weighted with lead, and the thought that that comparative rest was so near was a spur that made her start off almost briskly to overtake the caravan.

The last straggler had disappeared round the bend when she and Hoyt reached it. There, as though shorn by some gigantic knife, the cliff walls ended, and beyond lay rolling country, low hills and shallow valleys where *drinn* bushes and camel thorn grew sparsely in a stony soil.

But mounted again, wedged securely between the two cross-shaped peaks of her high Saharan saddle, Isma did not pay much heed to her surroundings. Even the cold spatter of sudden rain on her cheek failed to arouse interest, for it had rained before on the hamada, sharp driving rain that had stung like hailstones. Nodding drowsily with closed eyes, letting her limping camel go where he would, she lost all sense of time, and she did not know if one hour or two had passed when she woke with a start to see the baggage camels kneeling around her in little

groups and the men at work untying bundles and bales.

It was in one of the shallow little valleys set cupwise between two long low mounds, scarcely high enough to be called hills, that camp was being pitched, a drafty, dreary looking spot very different from anything Isma had yet seen. But had it been ten times drearier she would have welcomed it, for it meant rest and food, and nothing else seemed to matter. And the hot tea of which she had been dreaming promised soon to materialize, for brushwood had been collected from the river banks hours ago, and already a fire was burning, tended zealously by Mohammed, who was keeping one eye on it and the other on the kettle he was filling from a goatskin.

So small was the camp site that Isma decided to efface herself. Standing about and doing nothing, she was only in the men's way, and the kettle would boil no quicker for watching. So, in the mackintosh she had taken from her saddle, she climbed to the top of one of the low mounds from where she could look back toward the distant river bed she had been so thankful to see the last of. The mound, low as it was, afforded a fairly extensive view, and at once Isma realized that the outlook was not cheerful.

Earlier in the day, while still on the high hamada, they had seen heavy dark storm clouds banking in the north, and before the descent into the dry watercourse was reached the sullen-looking mass had begun to roll up threateningly behind them. Now it was nearer and still rolling steadily on, purple and black against the horizon, with lesser, lighter-colored fragments breaking away and scurrying like advance guards across the lowering sky. And coming with it Isma thought she heard a faint rumble, like distant thunder or the roar of a far-off waterfall. But where in this dry land could there be a waterfall, she wondered. Darker it grew, and darker, and, fascinated, awed a little too by the wild grandeur of the scene, she forgot even the need for tea as she stared at the approaching blackness. So absorbed was she that she almost jumped when Hoyt's voice sounded close beside her:

"Guess we're in for a deluge."

"Do you mean there's going to be a storm, a bad storm?" she asked. "I thought the season for them was over."

Hoyt sniffed at the air before answering.

"It's unusual at this time of year," he said slowly, "but it happens sometimes. Once every ten years or so there are exceptional storms, and then, when there's a lot of snow on the mountains in the north like there's been this year, the rivers get swollen and they come down in spate—a solid wall of water often feet high—bad floods that drown the surrounding country." He was pinching his chin as he said it, a trick Isma had come to associate with moments of stress, and she looked from him to the gathering darkness with a little crease growing between her eyes.

"Is that what you are afraid of now?"

Hoyt shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't know. I'm hoping not. But I'd be a heap easier in my mind if we could have got a bit farther on tonight. These floods sometimes stretch a hell of a long way, and we're nearer the river than I like."

"But there wasn't a drop of water in it when we passed through."

"That's nothing, in this country," returned Hoyt with a short laugh. "It's probably running like a mill race by now. But there's no need to worry, yet. I've sent two of the men back on our trail to watch. They'll warn us in time if the flood's coming in this direction."

"Is there any—" Isma stopped short, hesitating on the word.

"Danger?" he said bluntly. "There's always danger when these floods are about. That's why I should have liked to push on a few miles instead of making camp here. But the baggage camels are in pretty bad shape. They're all down, too tired even to eat, and nothing on heaven's earth will get them on their feet again till they're rested. But there's no sense in looking for trouble before it comes. And maybe it won't come at all, so let's forget it and go get some tea."

Half an hour later Isma was in her own tent, snug between blankets, trying to get a nap before dinner.

But several cups of Mohammed's strong brew had made her wide awake. So, content just to lie and rest, too ignorant of local conditions to be really disturbed by the possibility of an inundation, she fell to thinking of the many little incidents and excitements that had occurred since the morning she had said good-by to Cassie Hoyt at that first camp where the two nomads had visited them.

Since then, on several occasions, nomads had appeared in camp, and always at night. Strange that they never came in the daytime, she mused. But then everything was strange in this country. Even Miss Hoyt had behaved oddly that morning before she left them. Sitting half dressed on the side of her bed, after a long silence she had suddenly burst into speech and almost implored Isma to return with her to Algiers.

"When Al first told me he was arranging this trip for you," she had said, "it didn't interest me particularly one way or the other. I thought you were just one of these crazy young modern things wanting any new excitement you could get. But when you came to us, when I got to know you, I began to do some hard thinking. I ought to have spoken to you about it before we left Algiers, but you were so happy at the idea I just couldn't somehow, and every day I kept putting it off. But I've got to speak now, whether you like it or not. You're too young to do an unconventional thing like this. We've done our best to keep the trip secret, but, plan as you will, things have a way of leaking out, especially in this country. And if it ever gets known you went trailing across the desert alone with a man, even though he is old enough to be your father, well—it's bound to start talk, and talk that will maybe cling to you all your days. There isn't a particle of reason for talk. You'll be as safe with Al as you are with me. But that isn't going to help you any. The world's more ready to believe evil than good, and you'll have to face what folks who don't know Al will think and say. But it isn't only your reputation. Even if Messaouda could have come to fetch you herself, as she's promised she'll take you back to Oran, I don't like the idea of your going to

the City of Stones just now. Al says it's perfectly quiet down there, but I don't agree with him. The ben Aissa country butts on to Morocco—and there's trouble in Morocco. There's trouble brewing elsewhere too, and the Good Lord only knows when it'll break out. I hate to spoil your trip, honey, but I'm just worried to death about you. For heaven's sake give it up, and come back to Algiers with me."

But Isma had refused. Abandon her trip before it was begun just because some people had nasty minds? Go back, after all she had said to David? Not for anything! Opposition had only made her the more determined, and Miss Hoyt's repeated warnings, ambiguously expressed but none the less a direct confirmation of Isma's own suspicion, had failed to deter her. Perhaps there was trouble brewing where she was going; but against that she had Hoyt's definite assurance, overheard that night on the balcony, that Said wouldn't "be ready to move for a year at least"; and long before then she would be out of the country. So had her secret thoughts run while she refuted Miss Hoyt's arguments and firmly announced her intention of going on.

Remembering her own supreme confidence at the time, Isma gave a little laugh as she snuggled farther down into the blankets. They hadn't got very far yet, but nothing had happened up to now to make her regret her decision. In love with the roving life, strenuous though it was, she was happier here than she had been ever since her father's death. Already the camelmen were her willing slaves, shy, deferential creatures who treated her as if she was a princess, while the Sagamore had more than justified her trust in him. All through he had behaved like a kindly and considerate elder brother, when he hadn't been positively paternal. Paternal? Isma sniggered to herself. More like an old granny sometimes. The way he had fussed on the hamada, dosing her for a chill, and reducing poor Fatima to tears the morning the rain had first started and the extra wrap she wanted had been packed by mistake. How he had stormed, and how the camel had bellowed, having

to kneel for his load to be taken off again! Queer things camels, and queer how—they—always— A yawn broke the chain of her thoughts, and not even aware that sleep was near, her eyes closed.

When she woke, all the tired ache in her limbs was gone and to her amazement the tent seemed lighter, so light that she sat up and stared about her in complete bewilderment. Puzzling as to why she was in bed with her clothes on, trying vainly to remember just what had occurred before she went to sleep, she became gradually conscious of raindrops pattering on the thick felting over her head and, near at hand, the low hum of voices speaking in undertone.

"Is that you, Mr. Hoyt?" she called. "What in the world's happened? Is it last night, or tomorrow morning?"

Hoyt's deep laugh came softly from the farther side of the tent wall.

"Tomorrow morning, I guess, from your point of view," he called back. "You were just about dead to the world when Fatima took you your hot water before dinner last night, so I told her to let you lie. She stayed with you all night, in case you should wake and want anything, but she says you never stirred. She's bringing your breakfast right now, and if you take my advice you'll stay where you are and get some more sleep; you may need it later on. There's nothing to get up for. It's pouring rain, and we couldn't leave camp even if the camels were fit to march, which they're not. Take a lazy day while you can get it."

"Sounds heavenly," sighed Isma; "but how's the flood?"

"Bad," returned Hoyt, more soberly, "but I'm still hoping it's going to pass us by. Don't think about it. Time enough to worry if it comes. But, say, are you all right, little lady? Not got another chill or anything, have you?"

Remembering the nauseous dose that had come out of his medicine chest on the hamada, Isma made a grimace.

"No, rather not," she laughed. "I'm as fit as anything, only most ferociously hungry."

"That's great," he said approvingly. "Well, you won't have to wait more than a minute or two, and I guess you'll

find Mohammed has spread himself." With another little chuckle he moved away, and, crawling out of bed, Isma began to undress.

She had only just got back between the blankets again, more comfortable in pajamas, when Fatima came in carrying the longed-for tray. No mere cup of coffee and single slice of bread this morning, and no need to bolt breakfast, with all day before her, in which to do nothing but eat and sleep; yet, hungry as she was, Isma gave a gasp as she looked at the results of Mohammed's devoted labor. But in spite of all her doubts, the big omelet disappeared rapidly, so too the generous supply of toast and jam; and, smiling her perpetual inscrutable smile, chattering in broken English, Fatima waited on her with the quiet deftness she had learned in Cassie Hoyt's service.

That Algiers had been exile to the desert girl, Isma knew already, and often she had wanted to ask what had taken her from home to live in a place she hated, even though she seemed fond enough of Miss Hoyt. But always a feeling of not wanting to pry into other people's concerns had kept her from questioning Fatima on the subject, and it was the same reason that had made her show only slight interest when the girl spoke of the ben Aissa and the mysterious City of Stones.

For mysterious Hoyt had said it was. A city, unknown to any European except himself, that for generations had been feared by all the surrounding tribes, and about which strange stories had been told ever since the French occupation of Algeria. Haunted, so Hoyt affirmed, and honeycombed with secret passages. But laughingly he had added that there was no truth in the popular belief that the inhabitants used the bones of their enemies to embellish the battlements of the city. Bones there were, as she would see, and most artistically arranged, but the bones of camels, not men. This morning Fatima was full of talk, bubbling over with a kind of suppressed excitement that made Isma realize more than ever what was her joy at returning to her own country. Monosyllabic replies failing to stem the current of her conversation,

Isma at last felt obliged to send her away, frankly announcing that she wanted to sleep. And sleep she did until Fatima came again at midday with another tray, and the news that master had gone to look at the water.

Not much use getting up, if there was no one to talk to, Isma decided; while a peep outside, that showed a leaden sky and soft rain steadily falling, confirmed her decision and sent her back to bed, not to sleep but to read, the first opportunity she had had since leaving Algiers.

It was dark before she dressed and went to join Hoyt, whose return to camp she had heard a few minutes earlier.

The soft rain turned to a heavy downpour; the soaked ground was fast becoming a quagmire, and several times as she picked a cautious way between snapping camels dejectedly huddled in twos and threes, moaning their misery, she splashed over her ankles into deep pools. But she found an element of humor even in the discomfort, and she was laughing when she reached the mess tent.

Very bare it looked, with rugs and cushions rolled up and stowed away out of the damp on the tops of several large packing cases, and two more cases the only available seats. She turned to Hoyt with a grin.

"Enemy in sight yet, captain?"

The grin he flashed back at her was only a fleeting one that left his face graver than it had been before.

"In sight, and coming on fast," he said rather jerkily. "Of course there's a chance still, just about one chance in a hundred it may break in another direction before it gets here. But I've got to tell you, and I just hate to have to, if it does come it's maybe going to be—*hell.* If it was only me and the men I wouldn't care. It's our job to take risks. But you—you're a different proposition altogether, and I'd just give all I possess for this not to have happened."

For the first time she realized fully the immense gravity of the situation, and a faint feeling of dread, the fear of being drowned like a rat in a hole, held her silent for a moment. But the love of danger was in her blood, and fear went in a sudden rush of tremendous excitement that

brought the color back into her cheeks and made her eyes shine. With a quick little laugh she leaned forward and patted the Sagamore's arm.

"Don't you worry about me," she said, smiling. "There never was a Crichton drowned yet, and I'm not going to be the first."

His face brightened, but what he might have said was interrupted by a blinding flash of jagged forked lightning and, almost simultaneously, a crashing peal of thunder. Then the heavens opened and the rain fell in sheets.

With a muttered word she did not catch, that was followed by a peremptory "You stay here," addressed to herself, Hoyt rushed out into the storm, and by the light of the vivid flashes Isma saw the men running from all parts of the camp in answer to his call. Between the heavy rolls of thunder she heard him shout again, saw the men disperse and then reassemble with spades and sticks in their hands, and guessed, even before the work began, that he was setting them to dig trenches to drain the water from the tents. Passionately she wished that she too could lend a hand, but he had told her to stay where she was, and, much as it went against the grain, the only thing to do was to obey orders.

So, crouched on a packing case, too excited even to smoke, she tried to forget her own uselessness while she followed the white gleam of his electric torch as he directed the movements of the men who were now digging furiously.

Soon to this faint illumination two acetylene flares were added, which, drowned every few moments by the rain and as often relit, flashing here and there like pixy-lights dancing over a marsh, gave little real assistance but considerably increased the strange weirdness of the scene. Even the men, flitting about in the darkness with their white linen *gandouras* belted high above their knees, looked weird and unearthly, less like human beings than pale spirits in some ghostly ballet.

To Isma, on her perch, the whole thing seemed curiously unreal, so unreal that presently she began to have

an odd feeling that what she saw was all make-believe, that she wasn't in the wilds of Africa at all but sitting in a very drafty box of a theater watching a realistically staged performance of a Dance Macabre. So strong was the impression that when, as happened often, a slim, brown-legged figure stopped for a moment in the broad beam of light issuing from the mess tent to nod and smile at her, every time instinctively she clapped her hands as she smiled and nodded back.

Long before the digging was over, Mohammed came squelching triumphantly through the mud with a basin of scalding soup carried carefully under his burnoose, and at intervals came again bringing other dishes that only Hoyt's insistence, when from time to time he snatched a few minutes respite for food himself, induced her to eat.

For hours the work went on, and it was very late when Hoyt dismissed the men and sent them to get their own food. Like them, he was drenched to the skin, but he was smiling when he came into the tent, and there was a look in his eyes Isma had never seen before, though Arne, who had known him in France, would have recognized it.

"We've done all we can," he announced, mopping his wet face; "the rest is with Allah. Doud's still back on the trail watching, and he'll warn us if we have to make a bolt for it. But there's still a chance, so you'd better go and lie down, even if you can't sleep. Don't take your clothes off, and keep Fatima with you. I'll want you both together if I have to fetch you in a hurry." He paused, and as she scrambled down from the packing case caught her hands tightly, his eyes looking straight into hers. "I guess I don't have to say any more, little lady," he added. "From what I've seen, I reckon Crichtons can be relied on."

It was the greatest compliment she had ever been paid, and the color flamed into her face. "Oh—cheerio," she stammered rather incoherently, and turned in confusion to pick up her mackintosh. He helped her into it.

"Keep that by you," he warned, "and your torch. Now, *run*—and don't trip up over Beelzebub, he's just hating the whole world tonight." One of his boyish laughs fol-

lowed her as she splashed out into the darkness.

In her own tent, stripped like the mess tent and with the mattresses raised off the ground on more packing cases, she found Fatima waiting. A still-smiling, perfectly composed Fatima, who showed no sign of fear or even excitement as she pointed to packed suitcases and rolled up hold-alls, and gently intimated, as Hoyt had, that the rest was with Allah.

A comfortable creed this fatalism of the Arabs, Isma reflected, as she swung herself onto her precarious couch; yet what could the Hereafter hold for Fatima, who, being a woman, according to her own religion was possessed of no soul? But whatever Fatima believed, she was a game little thing, and if she died tonight it was some satisfaction to know that she would find that the Prophet had made one mistake, if he had not made many. And if she herself died? Well, she wasn't afraid—and Daddy would be there waiting for her and, with him, the mother she had never seen. But David, who had begged her not to go on this trip— Almost Isma could see him, gloomy-eyed as he had stood on the London platform, tremendously stiff and dignified, yet inwardly—she had felt it—longing to shake her. Would he really care—so very much?

She had no intention of sleeping, had not thought it possible she could sleep after all the hours she had already put in that day. But when, only a moment, so it seemed to her, after she laid her head on the pillow, she was roused by the loud calling of her own name, it was from an absurd dream in which she and David, cooped up in a horsebox in Victoria Station, were hotly disputing with Fatima and the Prophet, looking strangely like his culinary namesake, as to the Gadfly's right of entry into Paradise.

Of course she's got a soul, and it's Peter's job not yours, anyway, she was saying indignantly as another "Miss Crichton," this time accompanied by a vigorous shake, woke her completely, and she started up, blinking at the light Hoyt was flashing in her eyes.

"Your coats, quick," he said sharply. "Never mind

about anything else."

She was on her feet in an instant, dragging on topcoat and mackintosh, and before the last was buttoned she was outside, with one hand in Hoyt's and Fatima clinging to the other, running as she had never run in her life. All around her she could hear others running, and a babel of fierce confused sound; but in the pitch blackness only Hoyt's torch sent out a single ray of light, and, her eyes fixed on its pale reflection, her teeth clenched to keep back the questions that surged to her lips, she raced with her equally silent companions past groups of bellowing camels and through pools of icy water that splashed her from head to foot, until rising suddenly before her she saw the steep slope of the little mound she had climbed last night. At its base Hoyt halted.

"Up to the top," he panted, "and wait till I come," and was gone before Isma could expostulate.

In the hurried rush she had forgotten her own torch, and, left with Fatima in the darkness, she stood for a moment watching the receding gleam of Hoyt's torch, hardly knowing yet whether to be grateful to him or angry.

Shoved out of the way for the second time tonight, when she wanted to be up and doing, taking her share, helping, as she perfectly well could help. Ghastly to be considered just a piece of feminine inconvenience to go where she was told and stay where she was put. And ghastly to sit perched up on that moldy hillock without an idea of what was happening. Not funny, not the least little bit funny—but, like it or not, the thing she had to do. This was Hoyt's show, and she—loathsome thought—merely a responsibility he wanted off his hands before he started to save his precious packing cases.

At the thought of those oblong boxes, seen tonight for the first time without the wrappings that ordinarily hid them, all the suspicions Isma had tried to forget rushed over her again with renewed force, and a little chill that had nothing to do with the present impending danger stole coldly down her spine as she began to scramble up the gravelly hillside.

But, the narrow ridge reached, everything went from her but the pure discomfort of her position and a desire to know what was passing in the camp below.

Even had it been light, the heavy rain driving in her face would have made it difficult to see, but where she stood deep blackness enshrouded her and hung over the little valley like a pall. Unable to distinguish anything, she could only hear—the shouts of the men, with Hoyt's voice rising now and then above the rest, and the hideous din of the camels roaring in rage or fear—sounds that merely augmented suspense and made the tension more horrible. Just what were they doing down there? And how soon before the hungry waters came pouring through to chase them from the camp site, or drown them before they got clear? If she could only do something to help. If she could even walk about, instead of being compelled to stand here waiting for heaven knew what in the cold and rain. Already her feet were like lumps of ice, and so probably were the uncomplaining Fatima's. But she couldn't see a yard before her face, and how the mound was shaped she couldn't for the life of her remember. Two steps either way, and she might go hurtling.

Impatiently she thrust cold hands into her mackintosh pockets, and her fingers closed on the torch she had thought was left behind. The next moment she was looking into Fatima's solemn brown eyes, and laughing with sheer relief as she hopped up and down to take the numbness out of her toes.

That tiny spot of light seemed to change the whole situation, making at least tolerable what before had been almost unendurable.

She was still skipping from foot to foot, and urging the reluctant Fatima to follow her good example, when voices rose out of the darkness below and, as she trained her flashlight to look, half a dozen white-clad figures came rushing up the mound, to fling down a load of suitcases and bundles. Very shortly others followed, carrying small, square wooden boxes that Isma had never seen before. Then, after a considerable wait, the long packing cases

began to arrive, four men to each; and, noting their number, she understood, or thought she understood at last, why Hoyt traveled with such a large caravan. Heavy, those cases, and an awkward load for a camel. Awkward, too, perhaps, for the owner of the camels, if he met with the inquisitive little *sous-officier* Cassie Hoyt had suggested.

Had Cassie known of these too, as well as that other stuff that had come in the floor of the car?

With a mutter of annoyance, Isma swung on her heel and went back to the edge of the ridge to stare again into the black void where the camp had been. What did it matter what Cassie knew, or what was in those wretched boxes? It wasn't her affair. All that concerned her was her own personal feeling for the Hoyts. She liked Cassie. And she liked the Sagamore, too much not to be uneasy now at his prolonged absence. What was keeping him, and Doud, and those four other camelmen who were also missing? The rest of the men were all on the mound, had been there for what seemed ages. Why didn't some of them do something instead of chattering like a lot of magpies?

Wrathfully Isma glanced at the group of Arabs squatting near her, and then back into the void again with ever-increasing uneasiness, and, as moment succeeded moment, the eeriness of her surroundings and the strain of not knowing what was coming began to react on her nerves, shaking them and bringing strange fancies. Hardly conscious of it at first, and not realizing toward what her thoughts were drifting, all at once she found herself sweating with fear, not of anything tangible but of some horrible unknown something that seemed to hang monstrous and sinister over the windswept mound. And the quick thought came that this was Africa—ghost-ridden and demon-haunted, saturated with age-old evils and unfathomable mysteries of the past. Was Fatima aware of it, she wondered, and the men, who had so suddenly fallen silent?

Longing for the sound of a human voice, even if it was merely her own, she forced her lips to the only question

she cared to ask.

"Where is Mr. Hoyt?" she called to Fatima. "Ask the men why he doesn't come." But a gust of wind blew Fatima's answer to shreds, and she could only catch the word "camels." The camels? Already beginning to feel ashamed of the superstitious terror she had given way to, the mention of those homely beasts brought her thoughts back completely to the solid things of the earth. A whistle of dismay escaped her. The camels, of course. She'd forgotten all about them. A pretty pickle they'd be in if the camels were drowned. Yet better they than the Sagamore, if there was to be any drowning at all. But was there? If the flood was really coming, it ought to have been here by now. Perhaps it was all a mistake. Perhaps—she leaned forward suddenly, her ears strained to listen.

Above the voices of the men, who had begun to talk again, above the moaning of the wind, that had increased in force, she had heard another sound, a sound she knew to be the dull murmur of rushing water; and, almost before she grasped its significance, the murmur turned to a roar that sent the men shouting to their feet. Louder it grew and nearer. Then, with a thud that made it quiver, the first curling wave of the flood crashed against the base of the mound, and a shower of spray shot up to drench the already rain-soaked little party on its summit.

In an instant the mound was an island, and on every side Isma could hear the surge of the swift-running tide tearing at the loose gravelly soil. And the Sagamore had not come, could not come now through that furious welter of water.

Shudder after shudder went through her, and in almost childish rage at its futility she dropped the useless torch. The light might have guided him, but there was no longer any hope of that. Her hands clenching and unclenching convulsively, she stood staring into space. To her own predicament, stranded in this desolate spot alone among natives whose language she could not speak, she gave no thought. She could only think of the Sagamore whom she had come to like so much, of his chivalry to her and many

kindnesses. She had lost a good friend, she who had so few friends to lose; and how, oh, how—if she lived through this herself—was she ever going to tell Cassie?

With another long shudder she turned slowly to look for Fatima, who was still lying wailing and beating her head on her arms face downward on the wet ground where she had flung herself when the flood struck the mound, but as she turned, a drawling "Reckon we'll have to build an ark," that sounded not more than a foot or two away, made her start, and then spring forward with a little cry.

"Oh, I thought you were drowned!"

"Not this time," was the laughing reply, and out of the darkness two hands came to close warmly over her cold ones; "but it was a near thing, nearer than I care to think about."

"But how?" she gasped. "I was looking all the time."

"Not in the right direction," Hoyt laughed again. "I came up the back way. Beat the flood by about a yard. Haven't run so fast since I was at college."

"And Doud—and the other men?"

"Over yonder, on that other little Ararat, with all the camels we could get on their feet."

"Oh, I'm glad—I'm glad. I thought—" Her voice broke and suddenly she collapsed against him, clinging for a moment to the arm he slipped round her, trembling as she had not trembled during those horrible minutes of suspense. Then with an effort she pulled herself together.

"I'm sorry," she murmured apologetically. "I didn't mean to be such an idiot."

"Idiot—nothing," he retorted, almost sharply. "I'm hoping I'll have a few more idiots of your sort to help me through the next time trouble comes my way. You're just all in, you poor little kid, that's what's the matter with you. And right now I'm going to get you fixed up out of this damn wind. Have you got your torch? Mine gave out a while ago."

"It's somewhere near here," she answered with an unsteady little laugh, "but I don't know if it's any use. I dropped it." But as she stooped to grope for it he drew

her back.

"You keep quiet," he said authoritatively. "The men will find it. They've better eyes than we have."

His coming seemed to alter everything, and listening to his quick Arabic, watching the men hurrying to obey his orders by the light of the recovered torch, she wondered what would have happened to her and to all of them if he had not come. Like children these Arabs, up in the clouds one minute and down in the depths the next. And they had been down in the very lowest depths only a few moments before. But so, for that matter, had she, she told herself, so it wasn't any use trying to feel superior.

Then Hoyt called, and the sight of the little shelter that had been arranged for her among the packing cases made her forget everything but just how cold and tired and sleepy she was. In five minutes, warmed by the brandy he had literally poured down her throat, and wrapped in blankets that had been kept dry in a ground sheet, she was fast asleep.

Chapter Five: THE CITY OF STONES

IT WAS MORE THAN A WEEK before the march could be resumed, and then progress was slow and often interrupted. For this the still-spongy and waterlogged condition of the ground was partly responsible, but the chief cause was the loss of five camels that had been drowned and the consequent overburdening of the already heavily laden survivors.

Often, watching their labored movements, Isma had wished that those bulky cases could be abandoned, or, better still, that they had been washed away like the camels in the flood. But, distressed though she was for them, all her sympathy was not expended on the poor weary beasts. Some she reserved for herself and the other human members of the party. The camels at least could eat their fill while they rested between the short stages, but for those who drove them food was running short. The unexpected hold-up by the flood, and the subsequent

enforced delays, had put a big strain on the commissariat, and for days they had been on half rations.

Her appetite sharpened by the desert air, the longing for one full and satisfying meal became such that at last, to her horror, Isma found herself thinking of nothing but food. And gravely, as if no other thing in the world mattered, she and Hoyt would discuss their favorite dishes and compile elaborate menus that should be served—when Mohammed could lay his hands on the materials.

But they had to wait long before they reached the village where Hoyt hoped to find fresh supplies, and camels to help out his depleted train.

To Isma's surprise—for up to now they had avoided villages, and she had not known the extent of the Sagamore's acquaintances—the sheik of the district had welcomed them effusively, and supplies had arrived in bulk and with promptitude. But the camels had proved a difficulty. There were very few in the village and none of them strong enough for Hoyt's requirements, and several days passed before others, more suitable for the work, could be rounded up and brought in from far-off pasturages. Yet when at last they came, and the Sagamore and Doud had approved them, Isma was amazed at the speedy transaction that ensued.

"How do you manage to buy them so quickly?" she had asked, as she watched Hoyt hand over a roll of greasy notes which the sheik received with apparent indifference. "I thought Arabs always haggled and bargained for hours when they bought or sold anything."

"So they do, generally," he replied, "but this chap's a friend of mine. Lucky for us he is," he added with a twinkle, "since he's one of the most notorious bandits in the whole of Algeria. He's raided more villages and exterminated more caravans than he can possibly remember, and he's gotten a price on his head would tempt a lot of people if they didn't know as sure as two makes two they'd never live to collect it, for he's tremendously popular with his own tribe. It keeps him on the trot, though; he isn't often found in his own home town, but he's made

his pile, and raiding's just a game with him now. He's come to be a sort of Arab Robin Hood in his old age, confines his attentions to the rich and robs them to give to the poor—his own poor, of course, on the principle that charity begins at home. Now come and have some more of this mint tea, he's a recipe Mohammed would give his ears to get."

Less horrified than a few weeks ago she would have thought possible, for she was getting used to shocks, Isma followed him into the chief's house for the tea drinking that had become a daily occurrence. Yet for her new knowledge of him she found it hard to believe that the gentle-faced, soft-voiced man sitting opposite to her, and manipulating the teapots with such meticulous care, was really the hardened ruffian he was reported to be. She gave up thinking about it at last. Faces were nothing to go by. And in this country, as in every other, one just had to take people as one found them. Murderer he might be but he was their host, and a very courteous host, and he had helped them out of a pretty big difficulty.

Now the bandit and his hospitality were already many days march behind them. So too the last outlying spurs of the hamada. Descending by a series of terraces, they had reached low ground, a region of rolling sand dunes, easy to cross yet high enough to prevent any distant outlook, among which the camels found sufficient pasturage.

Progress was still slow, and Isma felt sometimes as if months instead of weeks had elapsed since she left Algiers, but she was in no hurry to get to her journey's end. In spite of all the fatigue and discomforts, she was perfectly happy and content, finding new interest in everything she saw. And it was well for her that it was so, for she had realized long since that the protracted journey was not due entirely to the leisurely gait of the baggage camels but that, for reasons casually referred to by Hoyt but not particularized, and into which she felt it wiser not to inquire, they were taking a very roundabout route to reach the ben Aissa country.

So accustomed did she grow to the daily routine, that there were times when she seemed to be living in a dream, when the City of Stones appeared less an actual fact than an intangible myth that would never materialize into concrete form, that they would continue to journey on and on indefinitely—until she would wake from her dream to real life again, with all its difficult problems. Even when the monotonous sand dunes gave place to a district of dark, forbidding-looking mountains, which Hoyt said marked the boundary of the ben Aissa territory, that dream feeling had persisted.

But all that was past, and today she was very wide awake, for last night Hoyt had told her that they were only a day's march from the city she had almost come to think she would never see. And now, a few hours after sunrise, sitting lazily on her camel while the caravan toiled slowly through a boulder-strewn ravine, she was wondering, for perhaps the hundredth time, at the strange chance that had brought her here.

The whole thing was rather fantastic. When the Sidi had first suggested it at Denes Abbey, it had seemed beyond all possibility of achievement. She had been thrilled by his descriptions of the desert, interested in the sister he evidently loved and admired; but, until Messaouda's unexpected invitation had come, she had never seriously considered the idea of visiting the Sahara, and it was not a wish to see more of the young Arab chief that had made her accept the invitation, but sheer love of adventure and the knowledge that she was being offered a unique experience.

The Sidi had been an agreeable acquaintance—after she had recovered from that first unaccountable feeling of repulsion—and the mystery that seemed to hang over him had made him rather a romantic figure in prosaic England, but her interest had gone no further than that. She was vaguely pleased at the prospect of seeing him again, but her thoughts were turned more eagerly toward the unknown Messaouda, for her pleasure in this odd visit would depend on the Arab girl rather than on her brother.

Were they going to like each other? It all seemed to hang on that. But whether she found Messaouda a congenial companion or not, at least she would get all the riding she wanted, on a decent horse, thank goodness, instead of this perverse, unlovable brute of a camel. Horses, she understood and could handle. But camels— Her ungainly mount was lagging behind, as he always did on every possible occasion, and with a grunt of disgust Isma brought her leather quirt down sharply on his dusty flank.

"Oh, get on, Horace," she muttered; "this isn't a funeral." But only a sulky gurgle came from him. She fell to thinking of Messaouda again.

Cassie Hoyt had spoken of her often, and in terms of almost extravagant praise and affection; but beyond agreeing, more or less indifferently, when Cassie appealed to him to confirm some of her eulogistic statements, the Sagamore had said little of his Arab friend's sister, and since the start of the journey he had scarcely mentioned her. But that wasn't any great wonder, Isma murmured to herself, looking speculatively at the big, loosely knit figure jogging along on Beelzebub a few paces ahead. Kind and deferential though he was to them always, he didn't seem really keen on women. At the Abbey he had hung more with the men of the party, and in Algiers she had noticed the same thing. Only once had she ever seen anything to make her doubt her opinion—that strange yearning look that had come into his eyes on the hilltop where she had watched her first real desert sunset. And that look might have been prompted by the longing for other things than a woman, or it might even, as she had half thought at the time, have existed only in her own imagination.

Meanwhile, whatever Messaouda might prove to be, she certainly lived in a country that nature had made almost impregnable.

Her thoughts drawn back to her immediate surroundings, Isma glanced about her and then up at the frowning cliffs that rose sheer on either side of the narrow ravine. Ideal country for guerilla warfare, she reflected, and al-

most unconsciously turned to look at the long train of baggage camels following closely behind. In a pass like this a few could keep back hundreds, and, with snipers hidden among the rocks above, any opposing force trying to break through would have little chance of achieving their objective. And no force could arrive so far without detection, for there were watch towers scattered all over the hilltops. When the mountain range first loomed in sight she had seen them, and since then had seen more, squat, stone-built structures that had a menacing look; and none of them had been tenantless. Whatever they were watching for, the ben Aissa were evidently taking no chances.

Isma looked again at the jagged rocks and tumbled masses of broken stone that almost blocked the ravine. A wild and desolate spot, probably the result of some great volcanic upheaval far back in the dim ages, it was a fit home for—bandits? The thought made her smile. Was the Sidi, like that gentle-voiced old man in the village, nothing really but a bandit chief, leader of a bandit tribe? Was that why he might not be spoken of in Algiers? If that was all, then those beastly old packing cases didn't really matter so much. Didn't matter? This time Isma laughed out loud. Was civilization losing its hold over her so soon? Was this the result of only a few weeks in the desert? To what pitch of lawlessness then would she arrive if she remained here the months she anticipated? She'd be a bandit herself if she didn't look out.

Another ripple of uncontrollable mirth escaped her, and to Hoyt's: "What's the joke?" she could only giggle weakly and mop her eyes with the back of her hand.

"Only a silly thought," she managed to say at last, "much too silly to tell you. But you ought to be very glad I can laugh. This isn't a particularly cheerful spot, is it?"

"We'll soon be out of it now," he called over his shoulder, "and then we'll stop for lunch. Doesn't that sound good?"

"Oh, don't," she protested, "don't remind me what a pig I am. I never knew I was such a glutton till I came to

this country."

She heard him chuckle, but he made no comment, and, the way grown nearly precipitous, she was forced to give all her attention to her dilatory camel until the top of the pass was reached. There, passing between two tall boulders like massive gate posts, that afforded room for only one at a time, they rode out into a shallow depression, set like a little cup on the summit of the mountain, where Hoyt gave the words to dismount. But only Mohammed and two of the other men brought their camels to their knees. The rest of the caravan, when it straggled into view, marched steadily on and disappeared again over a fold of the hill.

It was a departure from precedent at which Isma stared in wide-eyed astonishment, for until today the baggage camels had always remained in sight during the midday halt.

"Why don't they wait for us?" she asked, turning to Hoyt, who was stretched comfortably on the ground watching Mohammed unpack the lunch basket.

"No need," he returned lazily; "we're among friends here. We don't have to watch out for—bandits any longer," he added with an odd little laugh. But, her attention diverted to the men who were erecting a shelter over his recumbent form with sticks and a couple of burnooses, Isma did not notice the slight pause he made, or his laugh: and when the shelter was finished, and she crawled in beside him, she was too content in the shade it gave from the burning sun to bother any more about the caravan.

After lunch, kept awake by the swarms of persistent gnats that even Hoyt's cigar could not discourage, she sat silent for a long time, and so still that he thought she was asleep, and refrained himself from speaking.

But at length, with a sudden quick movement, she turned to him, pushing back the heavy helmet she had tilted over her eyes.

"I can't tell you how much I've enjoyed this trip," she burst out, "or how grateful I am to you for making it possible. It's been simply grand, and I've loved every minute

of it. But I've had awful qualms of conscience ever since we left Miss Hoyt. I hadn't the least idea, when you offered to bring me down here, what you were offering or what I was accepting. But I realize now, and I realize too that I've been a horrible responsibility. I'll never forget your kindness, and I don't know how to thank you enough."

Hoyt slapped at a gnat, triumphantly exhibited the corpse with a laugh, and shrugged his shoulders.

"Can't say I've done a great deal," he drawled; "you're such an independent little piece of goods you haven't given me much chance. And as to thanks—well, I guess you can cut them right out. I had to make this trip anyway, so one more added to the caravan wasn't any great matter. And if you've enjoyed it, I've enjoyed having you come along with me more than I can say, so I reckon we're all square, and—" He broke off suddenly, craning forward as if listening, then thrust his bare head out into the sunshine. Almost simultaneously she heard a wild whoop, then: "Come on, Miss Crichton, here's Said," and saw the rest of his lanky body squirm through the opening between the two burnooses.

Less disregardful of the hot sun, she lingered for a moment to adjust her helmet before following him, and outside, risen to her feet, she stood for another moment hesitating, wondering if the resplendent figure a few paces away, boisterously embracing Hoyt, could really be the shy, quiet little man she had known in England. There she had often found it difficult to remember that he was not a European. But here, in the high, silk-swathed turban that made him appear so much taller, in the long flowing robes that showed dazzlingly white under the gold-embroidered, dark blue burnoose he had flung back from his shoulders, he looked what he was—an Arab of the Arabs. And the thought flashed into her mind that his change of dress might not be the only change she would find in him.

But she had no time to pursue the thought, for, breaking away from Hoyt, the Sidi was beside her in an instant,

his dark melancholy eyes blazing with excitement, stammering breathless words of welcome as he touched his forehead in a quick formal salaam and then caught her outstretched hands up to his lips.

"I just can't believe you've really come," he kept repeating. "Even when I *knew* you were on your way I was afraid—afraid you'd get bored and go back, or that something would happen."

Though recollection of his words was to return later to puzzle her, at the moment it never occurred to Isma to wonder how he could know with certainty that they were on their way. She was only thinking, while she laughingly disengaged her hands from his, that he was not so very different after all from the man she remembered.

"I wasn't bored in the least," she declared, "and nothing happened. I've enjoyed the whole trip enormously."

"You like—my country?" he asked, with the same odd breathlessness.

"I think it's simply wonderful," she replied.

A strange look flashed over his face, but before he could speak a roar of laughter came from Hoyt.

"Hark to her!" he cried, beating Said vigorously on the back; "and to think that up to now I've always regarded her as a perfectly truthful young woman. Nothing happened, and we enjoyed the whole trip, did we? Well, you just listen to me. We'd the *hell* of a time—frozen on the hamada, nearly drowned when the Oued N' Sfer flooded, and half starved before we could make old Abdul Rahman's village. If Miss Crichton really likes your darned old country, she's mighty forgiving, that's all I've got to say. And, now you know the truth of it, just take a squint at the sun, will you? If Miss Crichton is to get her first sight of the city the way I'm wanting, we'll have to rustle."

More than a little embarrassed by Said's effusiveness and the exuberance of his welcome, Isma inwardly hailed the suggestion. It was the Oriental showing in him, she thought, rather scornfully, as she climbed on to her camel again—and was immediately annoyed with herself that she should criticize. The ways of the East were not those

of the West, so why carp at manners that were different from her own, just because she didn't understand them? That was only being insular and stupidly prejudiced. She had seen enough of Arabs by now to know that, for all their calm dignity, they were at bottom an emotional race, easily stirred to excitement. And a visitor from the outside world must be an exciting event for anyone living in this back of beyond. He was only conforming to type after all, and it was inexcusable to accept his hospitality and then start picking holes in him.

With a mental resolve to be more tolerant in the future, she turned her attention to the track they were following. Winding between deep cuts and folds in the hills, it was a very narrow one; and, obliged to ride in single file, they were all more or less silent for the first few miles. When conversation became possible again, Said appeared to have completely recovered his usual calmness, but he had many questions to ask, of the journey, of her stay in Algiers, and of Denes Abbey and the Arnes. And Isma was glad enough to talk, for the conformation of the ground gave no outlook and the way was uninteresting.

But when two hours had passed, and both men had fallen silent again, she began to get very tired of the shut-in trail and the monotonous ups and downs that seemed unending. They had come to a steeper slope than usual, had nearly reached the top—which looked no different from others they had surmounted, only to find another ridge confronting them—and she was on the point of asking how much farther this maze of turns and twists extended, when Hoyt suddenly swung Beelzebub closer and caught at her camel's headrope.

"Shut your eyes, Miss Crichton," he said quickly.

"But why—" she was beginning.

"Never mind why. Shut them," he repeated.

"Well, hold on to Horace then, or I'll fall off," she laughed, and covered her face with her hands. She felt her camel rise to the ridge, and leaned back instinctively as he lurched forward and downward. Then he stopped, and Hoyt's voice came again: "Now look."

Looking, she gave one little gasp and sat speechless, for the view that burst on her so unexpectedly was grander far and ten times more wonderful than anything she had yet seen.

Hundreds of feet below the little stony plateau where the camels stood bunched together, lay a vast circular plain of shining golden sand, enclosed by high, blood-red hills that seemed to surround it like a wall; and in the middle of the plain, built on a single gigantic rock that covered many acres, the City of Stones reared its great pyramidal bulk up to the sky. Terraced and battlemented, rising tier upon tier to the gleaming white shaft of the minaret that crowned it, it stood clear and sharp in the bright light of the afternoon sun, grim and formidable-looking yet strangely beautiful in its massive strength. But the grim fortress city was only half the wonder of that arid-appearing plain. To the left, and at a little distance from it, in startling contrast to its stark bareness, stretched a long narrow belt of luxurious vegetation—thousands of tall date palms, their long feathery fronds swaying in the faint breeze, and patches of growing crops, vivid splashes of brightest green clustered among fruit trees, that gave evidence of abundance of water and a richly fertile soil.

In this desert place it seemed almost a miracle, and for long Isma looked and marveled, too absorbed to remember that time was passing and they had still some way to go. Not until Hoyt reminded her of the fact did she reluctantly drag her gaze away and turn in her saddle to throw a quick smile of understanding at Said.

"I don't wonder you love your home," she exclaimed. "I only wonder you can ever bring yourself to leave it."

Again that same strange look flickered across his face. But already she was following the Sagamore, who had started on ahead, so, with only a murmur, too low for her to hear, he reined his camel behind hers and once more, in single file, they began the long descent down to the plain.

Only a few feet wide, the track was appallingly steep, and more than once, as she rode its zigzag course, a wall of

rock rising sheer above her on one side and a precipitous drop on the other, Isma found herself thanking Providence for no nerves and a steady head. But the surface was good, so good that Hoyt was moved to sarcastic comment.

"See what it is to be one of the favored sex, Miss Crichton?" he said, grinning at her, when a sharper turn than usual brought them almost face to face. "Said's never taken any trouble like this any time *I* happened to be coming along. It only wants a strip of red carpet, and we might be royalty. How did you get your proud devils to road mending, Said?" he added, raising his voice.

"Ask Messaouda," came from above; "she fixed it."

Isma gave an exclamation of surprise, but Hoyt merely nodded as if the information was no more than he had expected.

"Thought so," he grunted. "I've told you often she's all the brains of your family."

A quiet laugh was Said's only answer. And looking at the steep track with new and greater interest Isma wondered what more shocks were in store for her in this queer country. Or was it only the ben Aissa and their friends who were queer? She'd have to wait to find that out. And it didn't matter very much if they were. If she didn't like their ways, if she wasn't happy among them, the remedy would lie in her own hands. It would be quite easy to invent some excuse and cut short her visit. But that wasn't likely to happen. She was going to enjoy everything, going to have a wonderful time—and wonderful tales to tell David when she got back to England. She'd be able to crow over him then, make him take back some of the things he'd said about this trip.

Isma's short upper lip curled at the remembrance of some of those things, but the next minute she forgot David and his remonstrances, for without any urging on her part her camel had begun to quicken his pace and a little later they were at the end of the long descent.

There was still a mile of level plain to traverse, and for some time, riding between Hoyt and Said in ever-increasing excitement, it seemed to her that they made no prog-

ress at all; for as they advanced the city appeared to recede, keeping always the same distance from them. She knew it was only an optical delusion, so for a few minutes she kept her eyes fixed on the peak of her saddle. When she raised them again the huge pile looked so startlingly near that a cry of amazement escaped her.

She could distinguish the buildings now, pink-tinged from the reflection of the setting sun that had dropped nearly to the level of the surrounding hills; the narrow ramp that wound round the base of the great rock up to the main gateway; and, set in intricate patterns, gleaming like ivory against the dark stone of the battlements, the famous ornamentation of camel bones that had given rise to so many sinister stories.

Eager to see every detail, she reached for her field glasses, and, as she trained them on the gateway, the doors opened, and a body of horsemen poured through and down the ramp at a breakneck gallop.

Utterly regardless of life and limb they seemed, and, expecting every moment to see one or another go headlong over the edge of the ramp, unconsciously Isma breathed a sigh of relief when they reached the level and came racing across the golden plain, their white burnooses streaming in the wind. Two abreast, they advanced, without slackening speed, to within a hundred yards of the now stationary camels. There, with abruptness that flung the foam-flecked horses back onto their haunches, they checked, and dividing into two long lines, wheeled inward forming a lane. Then down the lane in a swirl of dust and sand came a single Arab, clad in the elaborate dress of a chief and mounted on a great black horse, riding like a hurricane; and, as horse and rider flashed between the double row of tribesmen, a hundred rifles swung up in salute, and from a hundred throats burst the wild acclamatory yell: *"Ya Messaouda! Ya, Messaouda!"*

Messaouda? Isma shot a quick inquiring glance at Hoyt and, quicker, glanced away again, feeling almost as if she had trespassed, for his face was white and strained, and in his deep-set eyes burned the same look of passionate

longing she had seen on the hilltop so many weeks ago. In a flash she understood why all other women were of no account to him. It was Messaouda he wanted, Messaouda who kept him in this alien country, and that explained a lot of things. But Messaouda was an Arab! The smile that was hovering on Isma's lips vanished, and a little shiver of repulsion went through her. Then she remembered his ancestry, the native blood that ran in his own veins, and, struggling against deep ingrained prejudice, tried to convince herself that there was perhaps some excuse for him after all. With his antecedents, it was hardly to be expected he should share in the general aversion to mixed marriages; when one owned a purebred Red Indian for a great grandmother, as he did, one probably didn't look at the matter in quite the same light as most people. Anyway, the fact remained—whatever came of it, the poor old Sagamore was head over ears in love.

Well, he wasn't the first to be bowled over by a pretty native girl, and this girl was beautiful enough to turn any man's head. And she could ride—by Jove, she could ride! Too good a horsewoman herself not to appreciate good horsemanship in another Isma craned forward to watch the struggle between horse and rider that was taking place only a few yards away.

Checked with the same abruptness that had sent the escort's horses slithering onto their tails, but too excited to stand, the big stallion was lashing out with his heels and rearing almost perpendicularly in quick successive bounds while, clinging to him like a limpet, the girl sat laughing, alternately coaxing and scolding. He was still waltzing madly on his hind legs when Hoyt, who had slipped from his camel, ran forward and, catching at his bridle, dragged him down by main force.

Isma heard Messaouda laugh again, saw her first stoop to caress the black's satiny neck before she took the Sagamore's outstretched hand. Then—the big black reduced to order and as hypocritically smug as the Gadfly after similar exhibitions of foolishness, his mistress thought with sudden longing for her distant favorite—together

they came forward, and a moment later Isma was looking into a pair of magnificent dark eyes, more tragic even than Said's, and listening to a soft low voice that held only the faintest trace of American accent.

Yet warm though her welcome was, and genuine as it appeared to be, Isma was conscious once or twice of a singularly searching look in the Arab girl's sad brown eyes, and wondered, with an inward smile, if she had fallen short of expectations. Completely disheveled and much in need of a bath she knew herself to be, but she had a feeling that that minute scrutiny was not for mere externals. Probably just natural curiosity, she decided at last, and promptly forgot all about it while she answered Messaouda's questions about the journey and tried to remember some of the many messages with which she had been entrusted by Miss Hoyt.

When at length a move was made, and the little party passed down the ranks of waiting tribesmen, there came another wild burst of cheering, and this time, sharp above the raucous voices, the rattle and crack of rifle shots fired into the air. Smothering a desire to laugh, for it all seemed so ridiculously theatrical, wondering what the girl at her side thought of it, covertly Isma glanced at her—and went suddenly scarlet, for there was amusement and complete understanding in the look that met hers. Stammeringly she tried to explain what to herself seemed a breach of good manners, but Messaouda only smiled.

"You don't have to apologize," she broke in, with a friendly little nod. "I know it's terribly like a circus parade, and it must seem very strange to you, but it's natural to us, and I love it. When I was in school in America I'd follow a circus for miles whenever I got the chance; it sounded so homey. And when I got home, and the men met me back there at the foot of the hills, I just cried and cried, I was so happy to hear it again."

"Weren't you happy in America?" Isma asked curiously, wondering, as she had often wondered lately, what possible use a western education could be to either of these desert dwellers.

Messaouda shook her head.

"I tried to be. I ought to have been, for everyone was perfectly lovely to me, but all the time I was hungry to be back where I belonged, hungry for my own people."

Isma's face clouded, for that confidence was like a rough hand laid on an unhealed wound. During these last weeks of strain and excitement she had had little time to think. Now, more poignantly than ever, the recollection of all she had lost rushed over her again, and with it bitter envy of the Arab girl who still had a home and people she loved to care for. But she shut her lips tightly on her own bitterness. To no stranger could she speak of these things. Only David knew, and she had never meant to tell him.

"It must have been rotten for you if you were homesick the whole time," was all she could achieve, and, abruptly changing the conversation, began to praise the beauty of the gardens they were approaching.

Then trouble with her camel, excited by the smell of the water in the wells, kept her fully occupied until they reached the foot of the long winding ramp.

Eighty feet above her head, and completely encircling the city, was the high outer wall which, turreted and battlemented, rose from the earth and was welded into a solid base of rock. The light was going fast, and in the dusk it was difficult to see where rock ended and masonry began; and, gazing up wonderingly at the great sprawling mass of buildings, Isma marveled more than ever at the skill and labor that had gone to make so strange a habitation. Ancient she knew it was, built long before the coming of this Berber tribe who, centuries ago, had wandered from the north in search of a new and more isolated home. And the sense of its age, its very immutability seemed suddenly to oppress her. Not lifeless rock and mere stones fashioned by man's hands for man's need, she felt it to be, but a living, thinking entity—a sullen crouching monster that was only biding its time to rise again in rage and fury and cast out the petty humans who dared to invade its solitude as, eons before, it had

cast out that other unknown race of whom no record had ever been found.

It was the thought of an instant, and she tried to laugh at it, thinking she was perhaps overtired or that, unconsciously, her brain was reacting to some of the weird stories Hoyt had told her. But reason as she would with herself, the odd feeling persisted and, with it, as they neared the bone-encrusted gateway, came an overwhelming reluctance to set foot in this grim, forbidding-looking city. At the moment she would have given anything to be able to wheel her camel and ride back to the golden plain, to the desolate hills, anywhere, rather than enter it. Yet it was the place that for months she had most desired to see.

Angrily she pushed the heavy helmet from her wet forehead, and sat up straighter in her saddle. What on earth was the matter with her, she wondered. And what could have put all that drivel into her head about the place being alive? It might be haunted, she didn't mind about that, but all the rest was sheer raging lunacy—and she hadn't even a touch of the sun to excuse it.

Disgusted with herself, but unable to shake off the sense of foreboding that seemed to hang over her like a dark cloud, every moment she grew more and more depressed; but as she rode under the frowning gateway her mood changed and, quickly as it had come, the queer dread she had felt went from her, and only intense interest remained.

The massive wooden doors of the gateway gave on to a broad lane that ran between the outer wall of defense and an inner wall, over which hung the first tier of densely massed buildings. By the light of the lantern carried before them as they passed along the lane, Isma could see that there were no windows on the ground level of these buildings, but above were open casements brilliantly illuminated and filled with peeping women's heads.

Set in the inner wall, fifty paces down the lane, was another elaborately ornamented stone archway with similar iron-barred wooden doors. From this second vaulted archway they emerged into a large open square lit by hundreds of torches and packed with people who broke

into a deafening roar as the camels pushed their way through to a little cleared space in the center where armed guards stood in a ring to keep back the surging crowd.

Here the camels halted, but the shouting continued until Said held up his hand, when immediately it died away and complete silence ensued.

This instantaneous obedience to a mere signal was proof of authority Isma had hardly expected, and her lips curved in a little smile as she remembered the shy diffident young man who had always kept so consistently in the background at Denes Abbey. Not much diffidence about him here, she thought with a broader smile, and wondered what was coming next. Then to her surprise she saw that it was Hoyt, not Said, who was going to speak; and that he was not only welcome but extremely popular among the inhabitants of the city was apparent from the very first, for a deep murmur that was obviously pleasure greeted his opening words and often his speech was interrupted by laughter and loud shouts of approval.

To Isma, totally unprepared for anything of the kind, this tumultuous reception seemed the strangest, the most impressive scene she had ever witnessed; and, gazing curiously about her at the tall, whitewashed, colonnaded houses built round the square, shadowy and mysterious-looking in the flickering light of the flaming torches, and at the sea of dark excited faces hemming her in, again, as many times before, she wished she had Cassie Hoyt's talent. Yet even more did she wish that she had Cassie's knowledge of the language, that she could know what the Sagamore was saying to stir his hearers so profoundly.

As it was she could only listen without understanding a word, and form conjectures which she told herself were probably quite erroneous, but which at last brought a troubled look into her eyes. Dangerous material to play with, these emotional, inflammable Arabs, and Hoyt was playing with them—deliberately, it seemed to her. For a moment her thoughts ran riot. Then, angry at her own suspicions, mentally she began to argue the matter. Why,

because Hoyt chose to harangue the people, must she immediately think of those wretched packing cases? And suppose they were what she suspected, suppose he was running guns into the country? She had really no definite knowledge against whom those guns were to be used.

Harassed as she knew them to be by their Moroccan neighbors, the ben Aissa must be forced from time to time to renew their own stock of rifles. They had their frontier to guard, and these guns—if guns they were—could be wanted only for that. To imagine that they might be used for any other purpose was preposterous. Infatuated though he was, Hoyt couldn't be such a fool. And the ben Aissa were outside the French jurisdiction—over and over again, at the Abbey, Said had affirmed it. So why doubt his truthfulness? It was just simple explanation she had always hoped would be found. He wanted guns to defend his own country, and, for some reason or other, Hoyt had elected to smuggle them for him through Algeria. That was all it amounted to, and there was no need for her to worry any more.

Isma breathed a long sigh of relief. Convinced that she had solved the problem that had given her so many hours of uneasiness during the past weeks, she felt now as if a ton load had rolled off her shoulders; and, with a mental apology to the Sagamore, with no doubts left to mar her enjoyment, she dismissed the whole thing from her mind and turned eagerly once more to take stock of her strange surroundings. But she could see very little, for complete darkness had fallen and the far corners of the square lay wrapped in deep, impenetrable shadow, while the torches in the immediate vicinity showed only rows of white-clad, motionless figures, intent on the eloquence that was meaningless to her.

Was he going to talk all night, she asked herself with impatience that was tempered with amusement; and, grown tired of studying the few faces that were close enough to be distinguishable, she fell to thinking of the journey she could scarcely believe was really ended.

All this time the camels had remained standing, but,

as Hoyt brought his peroration to a close, and anoth roar of applause rose from the serried ranks of tribesme Isma's camel, grasped by some unseen hand, went su denly to his knees. Taken unawares, she shot off sidewa to be caught, before she reached the ground, by Sai How he came to be there so opportunely she never kne for the others were still dismounting, nor was it a matt to which she gave any consideration. She was only co cerned with the fact that he was holding her, with streng she had not known he possessed, and that she had made highly undignified entry into his capital. The thoug upset her gravity, and, disengaging herself, she gave w to peals of laughter.

"I'm most awfully sorry," she gasped between giggl "Hope I haven't knocked all the wind out of you. Hora always tries to shoot me off like that whenever he gets t chance, the brute. It's a good thing I'm not superstitiou or I might think it was a very bad omen for my visit."

Too amused at the toss she had taken to notice t effect it had had on the man into whose arms she h landed so unceremoniously, she never saw that under t deep tan his face was as white as Hoyt's had been an ho ago; nor did she see the look, that was almost fear, th leaped into his eyes at her last words. But it was gone an instant, and his even voice told her nothing as he to her up swiftly:

"A good omen, surely, since I was able to save you fro any hurt. May I always be so fortunate while you hon the ben Aissa with your presence, Miss Crichton."

Isma's lips twitched at the stilted little speech. Hig falutin', David would have called it, but then David nev seemed to realize that he too was given at times to makir pretty speeches, to her at any rate.

"That's very nice of you," she said lightly, "but I wa you, if you've only got camels for me to ride here, you have a busy time of it. And if he didn't see, for heaven sake don't tell Mr. Hoyt Horace kicked me off again. He rag the life out of me." Her smile showed how little sh cared for the Sagamore's teasing, but Said's glance ha

flown to the couple deep in conversation a few paces away, and in all seriousness he hastened to reassure her.

"I guess Al wasn't taking any particular notice," he remarked dryly. Then, as the crowd around them opened to give passage to three or four superior-looking men who came slowly forward, "You will forgive my father that he is not here to receive you?" he went on in hurried apology. "It is the hour of evening prayer and he is in the mosque. But I would like to present my cousin, Ishak-el-Akhar, and some good friends who are staying with us."

Hoyt's words to his sister flashed into Isma's mind. This must be the man who had refused to handle the *stuff*, who had left Hoyt to take the risk he himself had shirked; and yet he was a cousin, a blood relation of the family!

With a feeling of scorn, prejudiced even before she saw him, she swung round to meet the tall, powerfully built Arab who was advancing with outstretched hand—and hated him at sight. That he was one of the most magnificent-appearing men she had ever seen she conceded grudgingly; but she was looking for more than mere physical beauty, and his handsome hawklike face and restless furtive eyes aroused in her nothing but intense dislike and mistrust. Cruel—and cowardly, she reflected with characteristic impetuosity, and turned with relief, as soon as common courtesy allowed, to the three visitors who were hovering shyly behind him. But she had only time to see that they were all stout and elderly, with pleasant faces, to which she took an instinctive liking, and to shake the fat limp hands they extended rather diffidently, before Hoyt and Messaouda joined them, full of excuses; and a few minutes later, preceded by torches, she was threading her way with the others among a maze of narrow, twisting streets that seemed to be never ending.

Yet interest in all she saw prevented her from finding the way long; and glimpses into dark, half-open doorways, the scarlet imprint of a hand painted on a whitewashed wall, a goat that fled bleating down a side alley, hotly pursued by two screaming children, and the groups

of gossiping citizens squatted on the ground that were met with at nearly every corner, kept her commenting and questioning as they passed, always ascending, through the crowded town until, hundreds of feet above the great market place where Hoyt had addressed the people, they came at length to a cul-de-sac that ended in a high wooden door before which lounged two gigantic Negroes.

The door gave entrance to a large courtyard that was too dark for Isma to see more than the reflection of lights filtering through archways which, she learned later, led to the different suites of apartments that housed the many inmates of the palace.

Here the men left them, and, following Messaouda, she stumbled along dim passageways, up and down winding flights of stone steps, to a room that seemed only an anteroom, and from that into an inner room where she found Fatima busily unpacking her suitcases.

Spacious rooms, with deep window recesses and purely Arab in their furnishings, she saw they were. But tea was waiting, and she had little time to notice the exquisite rugs and hangings and the many preparations for her comfort, until Messaouda left her to rest and change, intimating, with a little smile, that she too must hasten to get rid of her own masculine garments before her father returned from the mosque.

"He lets me wear them when I ride with the men," she explained, "but he doesn't like to see me in them, and I have to do so many things he doesn't like. Yet how can I help it? He has no son but Said, and Said's hands are full, so I have to take my share of the work, and be son as well as daughter to him."

Several times during the hour that followed, while she lay on the soft divan smoking in lazy contentment, Isma wondered what that work was, and if she would ever know. But one thing she had learned: whatever were this queer Arab girl's activities, she was very obviously the idol of the wild tribesmen with whom she rode.

In a suite of rooms that were the exact counterpart of her own, she dined alone with Messaouda, who looked

Chapter Six: SECRETS OF THE PALACE

IN ONE OF THE SEVERAL DEEP WINDOW RECESSES in Messaouda's room Isma was standing close up against the iron grille, watching the antics of two small Negro boys, in the courtyard below, who were chasing a tame gazelle up and down the tessellated pavement and around the pots of flowering plants they were supposed to be watering.

But it was a game she saw played nearly every day, and at length, with a smothered sigh of impatience, she stepped back a few paces to glance at another recess placed farther down the room, where Messaouda sat on a low divan, surrounded by papers and busily writing. That particular divan lay always in shadow, for a large rug hung over the alcove behind it, yet it was the Arab girl's favorite seat.

Looking at her now, Isma wondered, as she had wondered many times, what queer fancy had made her select for her own exclusive use the one gloomy spot in the whole room. But then Messaouda was full of queer fancies, and if she chose to sit where she did, if she chose to ruin her eyesight by writing in a bad light—and such writing, all dashes and dots like the maddest kind of shorthand—it was, after all, entirely her own affair.

Meanwhile, had she completely forgotten that they were going to ride together this morning? Mechanically Isma glanced at her wrist, but the watch she still wore from habit had long since succumbed to the penetrating sand of the desert, and, shaking her head at it, heaving another impatient sigh, she turned her attention once more to the absorbed figure on the divan.

Idly at first, then with growing curiosity, she eyed the pile of envelopes that already half covered the rug at Messaouda's feet. Was it her own private concerns, or business connected with the tribe that kept her so often for hours at a stretch, sometimes alone and sometimes with her secretary, writing those interminable letters? It could hardly be business, in the exact sense of the word. In the north, all the Arabs, even the rich chiefs, were engaged in trade,

even more lovely, in her heavy silks and little jeweled cap, than she had in her man's dress.

Here, later, the old Sheik came to give her courteous welcome which Messaouda translated. Very old he seemed, and very frail, but he still carried himself well, and his beautiful, fine-drawn face showed Isma from whom his children got their good looks. With guests of his own to attend to, his stay was brief; but Said and Hoyt, who had come with him, remained to smoke and talk until long after midnight; until Isma, hiding her yawns with difficulty, began to wonder if Arabs never slept, and if the dawn would find them still talking, still drinking the mint tea which, brought fresh at regular intervals, seemed to be in constant preparation. And the dawn was not far away when at last she got back to her own rooms.

"Are you sure you've got everything you need?" Messaouda asked, looking about her with an anxious little frown. "I tried to remember just how the guest rooms were fixed when I visited my friends in America, but it seems so long ago, and the things I guess you'll want most just don't exist in an Arab house."

"I don't want anything more than there is, honestly," Isma assured her, yawning shamelessly now. "Everything's perfect. Only it's—it's awfully hot in here, isn't it?" she added rather tentatively.

Going to one of the deep recesses, Messaouda drew back the curtain, and, unbarring wooden shutters, revealed a large unglazed window that was guarded by heavy iron bars.

"Is that better?" she asked, smiling, as a rush of cool air poured into the stifling room; but the question went unanswered, for Isma's attention had been caught by a low droning sound that was coming through the opening.

"What's that—that humming noise?" she asked, and the next moment had the key to a remark of Said's that had been puzzling her from time to time throughout the afternoon and evening.

"It's only the radio," replied Messaouda; "they're recharging the batteries."

and trade caravans crossed the Sahara in all directions, from much farther in the south than the City of Stones.

But the ben Aissa were not traders. For centuries, since the time when their forefathers, in the train of Sidi Okba ben Nafi, first swept across Northern Africa bringing war and Islam to the country, they had been a purely fighting tribe. And though the gradual subjugation of the surrounding districts had left them at last with few enemies, a fighting tribe they had remained, fanatically proud of their ancient traditions and fiercely jealous of the independence they were determined to preserve. The Sagamore had explained all that, had referred, too, to the immense personal wealth of the old Sheik that enabled him to support a people who produced nothing beyond what was needed for their own requirements.

Was it then internal affairs, the ordering and managing of the tribe, that occupied so much of Messaouda's time? Did she act as estate agent, or whatever the Arab equivalent might be, for her father? She was quite capable of it, capable of a good number of things that were generally supposed to be outside an Arab woman's sphere. But Messaouda wasn't like an ordinary Arab woman, any more than the ben Aissa were like an ordinary Arab tribe. Both she and they were—queer. There was no other word to describe it. Just as the town they lived in was queer—queer and creepy, haunted if ever a place was. And some parts of it more so than others.

Those mysterious echoes down by the market place, audible even when it was deserted; and that horrible little square near the mosque where the houses were all empty and where no one would go after dark because of the showers of stones thrown by invisible hands that were said to greet any intruder. That might be nothing but a tale, though Said swore to the truth of it; but, stones or no stones, there was something definitely unpleasant about the place, an eerie sense of unseen presence always hovering near, and a feeling of being watched and followed—when no living soul was in sight—that was too real to be only the outcome of imagination. Even here in the palace,

those strange noises that sometimes came in the night and which no one seemed able, or willing, to explain. And last night, that man's voice, singing—when there wasn't a man in the palace who *could* sing. That wasn't imagination, and it most certainly had not been a dream.

More intrigued than really disturbed by the sounds that had waked her in the middle of the previous night—for a singing ghost, though annoying, was scarcely alarming—Isma stood for a little while deliberating whether she should speak of it or not, decided finally that she would say nothing, and, resigned now to the fact that there would probably be no ride this morning, subsided onto a heap of cushions to wait until Messaouda's correspondence was done.

Six weeks had passed since her arrival at the City of Stones; weeks which, full of interest and incident, seemed to have flown. With Said or his sister, and sometimes with Hoyt, she had explored nearly every nook and cranny of the fortress city, until she had learned it thoroughly, and now could easily find her own way about alone. For the first few days everything had seemed very strange and bewildering, and a constant fear that she might be surprised into making some quite irretrievable blunder had reduced her almost to speechlessness. But with Hoyt to refer to in moments of stress, that feeling of constraint had passed quickly, and she had soon fallen into the ways of the household.

They were less circumscribed than she had expected. Like the Touareg women of the south, the women of the ben Aissa went unveiled and mixed on terms of almost equality with the men. And though certain customs were rigidly adhered to by the Sheik's family, though the two girls—while other visitors were in the house—always ate alone, Messaouda was free to receive whom she would, and her rooms were the common meeting ground not only for Said and the Sagamore but for any other man who happened to be staying in the palace. Evening after evening they came, to talk and talk interminably. And as often Isma was struck by the extraordinarily deferential

attitude they adopted toward their hostess, and the deep seriousness of their conversation.

That Messaouda was the head and center of these nightly gatherings, that she exercised a remarkable ascendency over these men was very obvious. It was to her they always appealed when any dispute arose, and it was she who always seemed to decide any differences of opinion. Her word was apparently law, and not only in her own rooms. In all matters that concerned the tribe, she had a voice, and her influence extended far beyond the mere ordering of her father's house.

Though still very ignorant of the language she was endeavoring to learn, Isma had not taken long to discover this. Constantly with her hostess, she had seen and guessed much. And more and more, day by day, was she coming to the conclusion that the real driving force behind the ben Aissa was not the delicate visionary old Sheik, who spent the greater part of his life in the mosque, or even Said, strong disciplinarian though he was but the slim, grave-eyed girl who seemed to combine in herself the characteristics of both. The brains of the family, Hoyt had called her.

Listening to the faint scratching of the swiftly moving pen, Isma remembered the caustic utterance, and smiled, half in amusement, half in pity. He was probably correct. But he would probably have said the same had she been the veriest dunce. Everything Messaouda did was right in the Sagamore's eyes. He'd got it badly, poor old thing. And he was leaving tomorrow, and Messaouda didn't seem to care two hoots. It was all wrong, of course, and a good thing that she didn't care. But, wrong as it was, it must be pretty ghastly for him—and he was forty-five. Not much chance of his getting over it at that age. Ten years older than David.

Would David still be wanting the impossible when he was forty-five? He'd be alone then in all probability, perhaps eating his heart out in that great barrack of a place, perhaps grown warped and bitter—and all because she couldn't give him what any other woman in her sane

senses would be glad and thankful to give. Why was life so cruel? Why couldn't she care when he cared so much? Moodily Isma stared at the tips of her neat riding-boots, seeing only David's face in their glossy surface; and passionate resentment against herself, against fate, welled up within her. Why must she, of all people, be the one to hurt him? Why did it hurt her so much to know that she was hurting him? She had spoiled his life, and the knowledge of it was spoiling her life. Yet what could she do other than she had done? Was it her fault that she couldn't love, the kind of love he wanted, that the very thought of it turned her sick with disgust and fear?

Her hands gripped the silken cushions convulsively, and a longing for action, for anything that would divert her thoughts, sent her hurriedly to her feet.

But, as she rose, one of the two gigantic Negroes, who were Messaouda's special guard, came through the curtains that screened the adjoining anteroom and, going to his mistress, spoke briefly in an undertone.

With a startled exclamation, Messaouda looked up, responded as briefly, and waving him away, turned to Isma, her grave eyes full of dismay.

"My dear, I'm just terribly sorry," she burst out apologetically. "I wanted to finish these letters before Al went, and I forgot all about you. I feel so ashamed. And now Lakadha says there's a visitor, and I'm afraid we shan't get that ride after all. And I don't know where the men have got to. Do you think you could amuse yourself until lunch time?" she added, rather doubtfully, and with a look that made Isma hasten to reassure her.

"Of course I can," she said, smiling. "Don't bother about me. I'll go out and take a prowl. It'll be a good opportunity to air my scanty Arabic. Rude?" she went on, already in the anteroom and only her laughing face showing between the curtains. "What rubbish! You're not being rude in the least. I wish you wouldn't think I always want to be entertained. I don't a bit. I'm quite happy to poke about alone when you're busy. And don't worry if I'm late. It'll be time enough to send out the town crier

if I don't come home with the goats."

This last was a jest against herself, for the nightly procession of excited nannies, rushing bleating through the street to the homes of their respective owners, after being driven into the town from the far-off pastures, was a never-failing amusement; and one evening during the first week of her visit she had been lost for hours, while search parties went in all directions, before she was found in a tiny alley, disheveled and breathless, helping a swarm of screaming children to round up the family treasure. So a laconic "Goats" had become her excuse for any tardy appearance, and Messaouda's invariable laugh came to her now as she dropped the heavy curtains back into place.

Crossing the anteroom she went through the open door to a small landing, ran lightly down the winding flight of steep stone steps that led to the courtyard and, at the bottom, in the dim archway, bumped violently into two men who were on the point of entering.

The next moment her hand was being vigorously shaken and she found herself looking into the wrinkled, benevolent-appearing face of the redoubtable Abdul Rahman, while, behind him, a grinning Lakadha held out the helmet that had been jerked from her head. In her astonishment the little Arabic she knew became even less, and a few halting words of greeting was all she could achieve before, salaaming profoundly and smiling at her as if she was his dearest friend, and long lost at that, the old bandit shook hands again and started to mount the steps she had just descended.

So he was the visitor. With her lips pursed in a soundless whistle Isma stared after his retreating figure, and then pursued her way thoughtfully. The hospitality of the ben Aissa family seemed to be unbounded. Ever since her own arrival there had been a constant stream of guests coming and going, old and young alike. And now this unrepentant old sinner was here. Why had he come? To sit at the feet of Messaouda, like the others, and imbibe—wisdom? Hardly. According to the Sagamore there wasn't much Abdul didn't know, except charity to his neighbor

—and it wasn't to be supposed that he had come to learn that.

Arrived at the little cul-de-sac outside the palace entrance, Isma paused for a moment, wondering in which direction she would go, and suddenly the idea came to her to make another examination of the haunted square near the mosque. She had always gone there in the afternoon. In the morning it might be less spooky. At least it was worth the trial.

There were few people to be seen in the streets, for it was market day, and those she met merely smiled and salaamed and passed on, with only a backward glance or two of curiosity. No one followed her; no beggar whined for alms in the name of Allah—so far as she had been able to see there were no beggars in the whole city—and even the children only giggled shyly, and resumed their play.

It was understandable now after the weeks she had lived among them; but at first, in view of tales told of other Arab towns, she had often wondered if it was just natural dignity and courtesy that had kept them from mobbing her as she had fully expected they would, for, with the exception of Cassie Hoyt, some years before, she was the only white woman they had ever seen. That their attitude toward her had added greatly to the pleasure and comfort of her visit, she knew, and was correspondingly grateful. What she did not know was the fact that they were acting under express orders from a chief whose word was omnipotent, and who passionately wished to spare her even the smallest inconvenience and annoyance.

So, untroubled, greeted everywhere as the friend of the family whose guest she was, today, like any other day, she wandered on, with her hands in her pockets and whistling softly to herself, as freely as if the City of Stones, and its reputedly ferocious inhabitants, had been the peaceful little village of Kings Crichton.

The square, when she reached it, was deserted, as it always appeared to be, and stifling in the heat of the midday sun, a heavy oppressive heat that sent the perspiration trickling down her face and made her think longingly of

the narrow streets where at least there was some shade, and an occasional passer-by to give life to the scene. Here was utter desolation, and silence so great that the swift swoop of a bird suddenly flitting past brought a startled exclamation from her. But not until she stood in the middle of the square did she begin to feel the first warnings of the disquietude that had always assailed her before. Then, all at once, it came in a rush; and, alone though she knew she was, she seemed to feel herself surrounded by a multitude, a swarming, ever-increasing throng that she felt vaguely was hostile and malevolent, pressing closer and closer, shrieking at her with voices she could not hear, staring at her with eyes she could not see. Never had she sensed the consciousness of that unseen host so strongly, been more acutely aware of its realness; and, her heart racing, her ears strained to catch the slightest sound, again and again, instinctively, she moved quickly to one side as though to avoid contact with some actual bodily form.

Her hands grew wet, as well as her face, and only an intense curiosity and a remnant of pride kept her from taking to her heels and beating an ignominious retreat.

It was nothing but imagination. Firmly she kept on repeating it, yet all the time her glance went straying from one deserted house to another, to dark doorless entries and shutterless windows that were all wells of shadowy gloom, that might hold—anything. And there was one house, directly opposite where she stood, to which her gaze went oftenest, until at last her whole attention became focused on it; for a very definite feeling had taken hold of her that, from the black recesses of that one particular house, some power, some current of influence, stronger than anything she had yet felt, was forcefully reaching out toward her and, even more definite and more nerve-shaking, that, as she watched, so was she being watched.

Knowing the people's dread of the place, that no man or woman of the ben Aissa would put foot in any of these ill-reputed dwellings, almost was she tempted to leave well alone and abandon any further investigation, but once

more pride intervened. Determined to prove to herself conclusively that the whole thing was nothing but fancy, fed by the tales she had heard, with head up and obstinate chin thrust forward, she started slowly to walk toward the house. Yet her determination could not carry her past the threshold, and, with one foot on the broken doorstep, with her body poised for instant flight, she bent forward to peer into the pitch-black interior.

At first—nothing; even the strange compelling influence that had seemed to draw her had gone, and a smile at her own idiocy was beginning to curl her lip. Then suddenly—and she felt her hair crisp at the back of her head, her heart give a quick wild leap—far back in the dark shadows something that appeared almost imperceptibly to move, a formless shape, and in the midst of it two eyes, brilliant and piercing, that met and held hers—but only for the fraction of a second. Then her nerve broke, and the next moment she was back in the middle of the square again, running swiftly and blindly in search of the human companionship she prayed she might find in the adjacent streets.

What she had seen, or thought she had seen, she neither knew nor cared. She only wanted to find herself once more among the commonplace realities of everyday life, and to forget what a complete and arrant coward she had been. But the thought of those horrible eyes went with her, and, panic-driven, she raced the length of the first street, rounded the corner, and, for the second time that morning, ran full tilt into a man who was walking in the opposite direction. The impact nearly threw her off her feet, and to save herself from falling she clutched at the ragged brown burnoose that completely enveloped her fellow-sufferer. But before she could recover breath enough to speak, with a jerk that sent her reeling back against the wall of the nearest house, he wrenched the tattered garment from her grasp, and, drawing the deep hood closer about his face, vanished round the corner almost as quickly as she herself had come, leaving her, still breathless, to stare after him in wide-eyed astonishment.

He had spoken no word, not even his eyes had been visible in the cavernous hood of his grimy old burnoose, but his height and the breadth of his shoulders had betrayed him, while the deep triangular scar that had showed on his wrist when he raised his hand to his face —a scar she had seen many times—was absolute and conclusive proof of his identity. It was Ishak she had crashed into. And what was Ishak doing in the town, when two days ago he had taken leave of everyone and started for the north with the caravan Hoyt was to catch up with later? Something he wanted to keep secret. That was very obvious.

The immaculate Ishak wasn't hiding the handsome face he was so pleased with, and wearing those disgusting rags, for any good purpose. He was up to some mischief, playing some deep game or other. But what game, what mischief? He was thought to be miles away, and yet he was there, sneaking furtively through the streets, disguised as the poorest kind of nomad. If he hadn't anything to hide, wasn't up to something he didn't want known, why the masquerade, and why the hasty retreat when he saw who it was he had bumped into? He probably didn't guess she had recognized him, but it must have given him a nasty jolt all the same. And a good thing too. Make him think a bit. All recollection of the fright she had had in the little square had been driven out of Isma's head, and, moving a pace or two from the wall, she stood gazing perplexedly at the corner round which Ishak had disappeared so promptly.

From the first she had disliked and mistrusted him, a dislike that had grown in proportion with his own repeated, though secret, efforts toward closer acquaintanceship. It was during her solitary walks that these efforts had been most noticeable. Often, more often during the last two weeks, he had appeared, as if by accident, to effect surprise, and then turn and walk with her, constituting himself as guide and companion, in spite of the chilly reception he was always accorded. And the insolent admiration in his eyes, the invariable trend of his conversation—

voiced in the broken French he spoke only when they were alone—had each time made her writhe with inward rage, until at last she had come to loathe the very sight of him. And not only she. Walking with him, she had frequently seen both women and girls shrink from his look when he passed, the same insufferable look that always made her own blood boil.

The frown on Isma's face deepened to a scowl as she thought of it now. How dare he couple her with them? How dare he look at her or any other woman like that when all the time— But that didn't matter at the moment. As far as she personally was concerned she could deal with Ishak, if it became absolutely necessary. It was his sudden reappearance in the town that was the worry. There might be a perfectly legitimate reason for his return, it might be only her own instinctive dislike that made her so suspicious of him, but the whole thing looked queer. Yet she couldn't speak of it to anyone, any more than she could speak of his many impertinences. She was a guest, and he a member, of the family. She could do and say nothing, regardless of her own private opinion.

But this conclusion brought no ease to Isma's mind; rather did it increase her uneasiness; and, lost in thought, she never heard the sound of footsteps behind her, never guessed she was not still alone until two hands laid suddenly on her shoulders sent her round with a startled cry to meet Hoyt's quizzical eyes that changed to a look of quick concern when he saw the pallor of her face.

"I didn't mean to scare you," he said penitently. "I'm terribly sorry. I never thought but you'd hear me coming. What did you think had got you? You're as white as a ghost."

She had no wish just then to be reminded of ghosts.

"Am I?" she replied indifferently, but scrubbing the color back into her cheeks as she spoke. "It must be the heat. It's the hottest day we've had, I think. I was just going up to the mosque," she went on, not quite truthfully. "I thought it might be cooler there. These streets are stifling. Will you come, or are you too busy? I expect

you've a lot to do as it's your last day here."

Not altogether convinced by her glib explanation, or sure that he himself was entirely responsible for that unexpected little display of nerves, he paused to look searchingly at her for a moment before answering.

"No," he said at length. "I'm through with everything —except the little talk I want to have with you before I go. The mosque will do as well for that as anywhere. I came to look for you as soon as I heard you weren't riding."

But he seemed in no haste to begin the little talk; and almost in silence they climbed the steep ascent to the mosque, walked across the courtyard and out through a small door to a narrow, railed platform which, used as an observation post in the old troublous days, commanded a view of the big level plain and the surrounding hills.

Far down in the gardens below, the heavy fronds of the palm trees hung limp and motionless, but here a faint breeze brought intermittent waves of coolness that made Isma sigh with relief as she perched on the edge of the stone railing and, lighting a cigarette, settled down to quiet enjoyment of a scene that for her never lost its charm.

Today the bold sweep of the encircling hills and the shining yellow plain appeared even more beautiful than she had ever seen them, and all at once she realized that she had come to love this strange wild country, that to leave it would be almost as big a wrench as it had been to leave Kings Crichton. Almost, but not quite. No spot in the world, however beautiful, could ever supersede the old home in her heart. But she had been happier here than anywhere since she had had to leave Kings Crichton, happy enough to remain indefinitely—if only that was possible.

Yet beautiful though it was, the wonderful view could not hold all her attention this morning. Strive as she would, her mind kept recurring to the incident of an hour ago, her glance turning again and again to the man who sat beside her apparently as lost in thought as she.

If she could only give him a hint. Yet how to begin?

"You'll have to ride pretty fast to catch up with Ishak, won't you?" she hazarded at last.

Hoyt shifted the cigar in his mouth.

"Not very," he said, with a shrug; "the camels'll go slow for a day or two, just starting out, and Ishak—well, he never was a hustler," he added with a tolerant little laugh.

"Was that why you suggested he should go on ahead with the caravan, instead of waiting until you were ready?" She was watching him narrowly as she spoke, but his face told her nothing.

"It wasn't any suggestion of mine," he replied. "I'm afraid I never thought of it. It was Ishak's own idea." To suit his own purpose, was Isma's quick inward amendment. Then aloud, eyeing him closer:

"I suppose you're rather glad to have him go with you, aren't you? It's a long way to travel alone, with only the men to talk to."

Hoyt shrugged again.

"I don't know that I mind very much one way or the other," he answered, with indifference that made her knit her forehead in a puzzled frown. Was he really so indifferent as he appeared? Or was it possible that he didn't know what she had guessed long ago, that in the big handsome Arab she hated he had a rival who hated him?

The loves of Ishak were as the stars in number. So Fatima had said, one day, in a burst of confidence, before Isma could stop her. But in spite of that, in spite of the hateful advances made to herself, she knew, as positively as though he had told her, that he had only one real passion, only one enduring and tremendous desire. At the bottom of his heart he was madly, desperately in love with Messaouda; and as madly, as desperately jealous of the man who, in love with her himself, seemed to give no thought to him at all. Day by day, watching from her corner in Messaouda's quiet room, and fully alive to what was going on if nobody else was, Isma had seen that jealousy grow, the hatred deepen in Ishak's glowering eyes, and wondered what the outcome of it all would be.

She was wondering now, and wondering more at Hoyt's

apparent blindness. They both loved the same woman, and they were going to travel together, in this land where treachery was rife and human life of no account whatever. If one day Ishak's jealousy should flame beyond control! If he should take this opportunity to gain a clear field for himself! And it could be done so easily, could so easily be made to look like an accident. A little shiver went through her. "Well, anyway you'll have Doud with you, and I'm glad of it. I like Doud," she burst out, so vehemently that Hoyt turned to her with a look of surprise. Then he laughed softly.

"Does that mean that you don't like Ishak?"

"I simply loathe him," was the prompt reply, and the smile on Hoyt's lips vanished as promptly.

"Why, what's he been doing?" he said sharply. "He hasn't been—annoying you, has he? If I thought that—by God, I'd break his neck for him!"

"I shouldn't mind if you did," she flashed. "He wouldn't be any loss. But you needn't do it on my account. I'm quite able to deal with him myself. No, I'm not going to tell you any more"—shaking her head as Hoyt muttered an angry question—"and I can't tell you why I loathe him. I just do, that's all. A case of Doctor Fell, I suppose," she added, with a light laugh that brought no response from Hoyt, who was still muttering wrathfully.

"Never heard of him," he growled; "but, Ishak—you must have some reason—"

The temptation to warn him was almost more than she could restrain, but to tell him so much was to tell all she knew, and that was impossible. She was not a spy. Besides, in spite of her own firm conviction, there was just a chance that she might be mistaken in some of the conclusions she had come to, might have let personal prejudice sway her too much.

"I don't reason about people," she said shortly. "I either like or dislike them. I happen to dislike Ishak. And if he had all the virtues, which he hasn't, I should dislike him just the same. You can call it illogical if you like, but there it is. I've no use for him, and I can't think how he comes

to belong in the same family with these nice people."

Muttering something she could not catch, Hoyt heaved himself to his feet, took a turn up and down the tiny platform, and came back to stand beside her.

"I'm sorry you think that way about him," he said slowly. "It makes it just a little bit harder for me to say what I've got to say. The fact is, I—er—I—" He stopped short, looking down at her dubiously, his fingers at his chin.

Isma knew that little trick for a sure sign of perturbation, and nodded at him encouragingly.

"Well, don't stand shivering on the brink," she said, grinning. "Put your hands together, take a deep breath —and jump right in."

"That's what I'm going to do," he said gloomily; "jump right into a sea of trouble, and I'm not looking for any sympathy from you, young lady. It's this way. I know you're loving it here, and I just hate to spoil your pleasure, but—but I want you to pack up your traps and come back to the north with me tomorrow." Isma stared at him in blank astonishment.

"But why?" she demanded. "Why should I go back now? I've been here only six weeks, and I meant to stay about three months. I really can't leave so soon. There are heaps of interesting places I haven't seen yet. I haven't even been to the oasis where the stud farm is—or whatever they call it here—and I simply must see that. I want to buy one or two horses, if I can persuade Said to sell them. I was talking to him about it only yesterday, and he said he wanted to take me down there next week. I'm looking forward to it enormously. It's—" A sudden thought checked her and she paused, a wave of burning color suffusing her sensitive face. "You don't mean—" she stammered, "you don't think that—that I'm being a trouble to them here, do you? That I'm taking up too much of their time? I know Messaouda's awfully busy, but I—"

"Trouble? Great heavens, no!" Hoyt broke in almost angrily. "Get that notion right out of your head. Messaouda is only too happy to have you stay as long as you

like, and if she thought I'd given you any other impression she'd be madder with me than she is at present," he added, with a rueful little laugh.

"Then why are you suggesting that I should leave now?"

Hoyt pointed toward the west.

"That's why," he said gravely. "When I brought you down here I never thought for one moment there was going to be trouble while you were here, at any rate. But now I'm not sure. That raid on the Moroccan border the other day—I made up my mind then this wasn't the place for you."

In no mood to take his warning seriously, Isma dismissed the raid with an airy wave of the hand. "But it didn't amount to anything. It was only a little scrap."

"Maybe," Hoyt replied, without any conviction in his voice; "but they were five miles over the border, and they haven't dared so much in years. What I want to know is, what's behind it? Who's pushing them? I'd give a lot to know that." The last words were uttered almost in a whisper, as if he was speaking more to himself than to her. And then for a moment he stood silent, his eyes fixed somberly on the distant hills.

Isma gave a little sniff.

"If you're trying to frighten me out of the country, Mr. Hoyt," she said, rather stiffly, "you may as well give it up, for I'm not going. I'm not in the least frightened, thank you very much. It's very nice of you to bother about me, but I can't see any necessity for cutting short my visit just because half a dozen—"

"Half a hundred."

"Well, half a hundred then—because half a hundred moldy old Moroccans came slipping over the border to pick up a few camels."

Hoyt jerked his head impatiently.

"You can't see the necessity because you don't know the danger," he retorted, with more heat than she had ever seen him show. "Little raids lead to big raids. Did Messaouda happen to tell you that, of those fifty, only ten got away? No? I thought not. Well, it's a fact. And blood has

to be wiped out with blood—in this country. I'd give anything if it hadn't happened just now, and I want you away before anything worse happens. I'm responsible for bringing you here, and I want to see you safely back myself; and I've got to go tomorrow. I can't wait, even a few weeks. I've got business in America, pretty urgent business, and I must catch the first boat possible. And I don't know when I'll get through with it—might be days, might be months. So you see how I'm fixed. If those devils over the border get busy again, I shan't know, and I couldn't get here. And if things went badly, if anything happened to you—how do you think I'd feel? And what should I have to say to David Arne?"

"And what has David Arne got to do with it?" The icily voiced question brought Hoyt round with a swing, to stare at her in even greater astonishment than she had displayed a few minutes before. "Got to do with it?" he repeated blankly. "Well, it would be a pretty serious thing for him, wouldn't it? You're going to marry him, aren't you?"

"Did he tell you that?" Isma's tone was still icy; and, beginning to be uncomfortably aware that he had blundered, that what he had firmly believed to be a fact was proving to be only supposition, Hoyt's sunburned face grew hot with embarrassment.

"He certainly did not," he replied curtly, "and if I've been under a wrong impression all this time, I'm sorry, and I apologize. But at the Abbey—everyone was talking—and I thought—"

"Then you thought quite wrong," Isma interrupted tartly, "and you shouldn't listen to gossip."

Hoyt accepted the reproof with sufficient humility.

"I won't—another time," he said meekly, and Isma laughed in spite of herself.

But it was a shaky little laugh that ended in a sigh, and, rising abruptly, she turned to look over the wide expanse with eyes that for once saw nothing of the beauty spread out before them.

"I don't want you to make any mistake about David

and me, Mr. Hoyt," she said at length, and her words came jerkily. "David is the best friend I have. I've known him all my life, and I know there isn't a better man in the world—but he is only a friend. I am not going to marry him. So, you see, he doesn't come into this matter at all. I haven't any ties or obligations whatsoever, and what I choose to do is no one's affair but my own. Please understand that, and please understand that it's no use trying to make me change my mind. You've been awfully kind to me and I don't want to seem ungrateful, but I'm not going back with you tomorrow. I'm very happy here, and I'm going to stay—just as long as I see Messaouda wants me. No, I'm not going to listen"—as Hoyt tried to break in. "If you begin to argue, we'll fall out, and I should simply hate to quarrel with you after all you've done for me. And really there isn't anything to worry about. Messaouda says it's perfectly safe, and I'm quite content to take her word for it."

A sound that was almost a groan burst from Hoyt.

"Messaouda says—" he echoed, and there was such bitterness in his voice, such pain in his eyes, that Isma looked away hastily. "Messaouda doesn't know what safety means. She never has known, God help her. She's lived on a sleeping volcano all her life, and she's so used to hear it rumbling she just doesn't heed it any longer. But she may be right," he went on more calmly, after a little pause. "She nearly always is. And those dogs over there" —he pointed again to the west—"got more than they were expecting the other day. They'll probably wait a while before they repeat the experiment. But all the same I wish you'd think over what I've said. It would take a load as big as a mountain off my mind if you'd agree to go with me tomorrow."

During the walk back to the palace he returned to the subject, earnestly begging her to reconsider her decision, at least to give his advice some serious thought. But his insistence only roused her inherent obstinacy and made her the more determined. Try as he would he could get no more from her than a laughing half promise to talk

it over with Messaouda. But even a half promise seemed binding; and when, later, Isma went to the Arab girl's room for lunch, it was with every intention of fulfilling that promise.

Yet lunch passed without any reference being made to it, for never had Messaouda appeared so radiant and happy; never had she been so full of eager plans for Isma's entertainment. With Al gone, and Ishak gone, and with no other guests expected for several weeks, she explained, she would be free herself to take a little holiday, to devote all her time to her guest. There was so much yet to see and do, she added gaily. Isma must learn how to fly a hawk, how to follow the sloughi hounds when they hunted the desert gazelle, and how to ride the fleet-racing meharis for which the tribe was famous. All these things she, Messaouda, would teach her. It was an entrancing program. And thrilled with the thought of it, carried away by Messaouda's enthusiasm, little by little all recollection of her promise faded from Isma's mind.

Nor did she remember until she was in her own room again and half undressed for the siesta which, regarded with scorn at first, had now become a habit. An exclamation of annoyance escaped her, and, uncertain what to do, she stood biting her lip and staring at the little heap of discarded garments littering the rug at her feet, wondering if she ought to dress again and go and thrash the whole thing out with Messaouda.

Then slowly she shook her head. After all Messaouda had said during lunch, after all she herself had said, how could she go now and calmly announce that she had changed her mind? It simply couldn't be done. It would be too appallingly discourteous, and it wouldn't be true either. She hadn't changed her mind. She didn't want to go at all. She wanted to stay. And, Sagamore or no Sagamore, she was going to stay. For surely Messaouda, who lived on the spot, must know better than he.

This final argument clinched the matter, and, resolved to follow her own inclination, she slid out of the rest of her clothes and into the thin silk kimono that lay in read-

iness on the end of the bed.

Two hours later, seated cross-legged on the divan with a writing pad on her knees, she was light-heartedly finishing the letter to David that Hoyt was to take and post in Algiers, giving glowing accounts of the happenings of the last six weeks, and more than a hint of the joys that were yet to come.

But of the raid on the border she said nothing, nor did she make any mention of the Sagamore's suggestion. It would only worry him when there was no cause for worry at all, she told herself; so, scrawling her name on the tiny space left at the foot of the last page, she crammed the closely written sheets into an envelope, sealed and addressed it, and scrambled up from the divan with a sigh of relief and the consciousness of a good deed done.

It was late in the afternoon before she found an opportunity to give Hoyt the letter, and though he took it with obvious reluctance, though she could see by his face that his own opinion was unchanged, unexpectedly he made no further attempt to persuade her to accompany him. What restrained him Isma never knew, but she was glad that their last talk alone had not been marred by disagreement and that they could part the good friends they had always been.

Only he came to Messaouda's room that night, and the knowledge she had that he must want to spend this last evening alone with the woman he loved made Isma very soon plead sleepiness and leave them at a much earlier hour than usual.

But in reality she had never felt more wide awake, and in her own room, ready but disinclined for bed, she stood for a long time at the open window, sniffing the pungent eastern scents that drifted up from the town, and which had become so familiar, and thinking—of Hoyt and Messaouda, of David and herself, and then only of David—David, who deserved the best that life could give, whose little finger was worth more than her whole body; and everything he was, everything he had, was nothing to him—because of her. With a long sigh she dropped her

head on her arms that lay crossed on the high window ledge.

It was the low drone of the dynamo in the wireless shed that roused her at last, and turned the trend of her thoughts. That there should be a wireless station here was still a puzzle to her; and now again, as often before, she wondered what could be the need for it, how the conservative old Sheik, who apparently hated all modern innovations, had ever been induced to allow its installation. Yet, she reflected, if he had conquered prejudice so far as to send his children to America to be educated, perhaps the wireless wasn't such a great wonder after all. He was a clever old man, in spite of his conservatism, and no doubt some strong motive had prompted him in both cases.

She was still wide awake when she got into bed; and, tossing restlessly, all at once she found herself thinking of her experience that morning in the haunted square, of the horrible inhuman eyes that had glared at her so menacingly. The recollection of them was vivid; so vivid that, staring into the darkness, for there was no moon tonight, she almost fancied she could see them again, shining now in this, now in that corner of the big silent room.

But this time she knew it was only imagination, and, at last, drowsiness suddenly coming over her, she fell asleep, her last thought a wonder if after all it had perhaps been only a cat or an owl she had seen.

It was hours later when she woke with a violent start that sent her bolt upright on the low bed, listening with every nerve quivering to the soft rich tones of the same man's voice she had heard singing the previous night; but, like last night, this singing voice brought no feeling of fear, merely excitement and an intense and overwhelming curiosity—curiosity that had to be satisfied, she decided at length. It wasn't funny to be waked in the night like this, and, ghost or no ghost, she was going to find out now what it was—if only to be able to sleep in peace in the future.

Sliding out of bed she huddled into a dressing-gown,

and, without waiting to put on slippers, groped her way to the anteroom and through that to the tiny landing where she halted for an instant, her bare toes curling on the cold stone, before she stole cautiously down the steep winding stairway.

Here the voice sounded fainter, but faint though it was she had got the direction of it now, and, too excited to notice where it was leading her, she followed it out into the starlit courtyard, into another pitch-black vaulted archway; then, hearing it louder every moment, up another flight of steps identical with the one she had just descended. Only when she reached the top, where a small lamp gleamed in a niche in the plastered wall, did she realize that the open door facing her was the door of Messaouda's suite of rooms, and realize also that the deep voice pealing out so gloriously in the inner room came from no ghostly or even human throat but from the finest-toned gramophone she had ever heard.

Only a gramophone! Disgustedly she whispered it, and choking with inward laughter at the thought of what she had set out to find, she started to retrace her steps, just as the song came to an end. She was halfway down the stairs, and still jibing at herself, when the sound of a cry coming from above arrested her, a strange wild cry that banished the smile from her lips and sent her flying with furiously beating heart up to the landing again and into the dimly lighted anteroom.

But she got no farther, for through the slightly parted curtains that screened the inner room she saw what held her for an instant motionless and wide-eyed—the rug that ordinarily covered the alcove above Messaouda's usual seat gone and hanging in its place a life-sized, exquisitely painted portrait of a young man in the dress of an Arab chief; and kneeling before it, staring up at the handsome bearded face, Messaouda, rocking to and fro in a very agony of grief.

In a flash Isma understood that some sorrow of which she was ignorant, and not physical pain as she had feared, had caused that terrible cry; and, wishing passionately

that she had never left her own room, hating herself for having blundered into another's secret garden, she turned quickly, to find Said standing close beside her.

It had never occurred to her that her ghost hunt might lead to her own discovery by any member of the household; she had thought it too late for even these night-loving Arabs to be about; and the color flamed into her cheeks as she remembered the flimsiness of her somewhat scanty attire. It was bad enough to be caught in what must seem an act of flagrant intrusion, but to be caught like this— Her cheeks burned hotter, and even more passionately did she wish that the floor could open and swallow her where she stood.

But without appearing to notice her embarrassment, showing no trace of annoyance or even surprise, silently Said motioned toward the door and, going before her, led the way down the winding stairs. Not until they were in the courtyard, where the gloom made his face indistinguishable, did she overcome shyness sufficiently to falter the apology she felt was due.

"It was the voice—singing," she stammered. "I heard it last night, and it woke me again tonight. I wanted to find out what it was. But I wasn't—I mean—I didn't know—"

"How should you know?" he said hurriedly, as if her agitation troubled him. "It was Messaouda's own fault; she ought to have kept her door shut. But she doesn't always think, poor girl, and these last few days she's been all wrought up. The picture—over the divan," he added, after a pause; "it was uncovered; you must have seen it. He was her husband, a cousin of ours, one of my mother's family. They had loved each other since they were children, and she worshiped the ground he walked on. And when he was killed, within a year of their marriage, I think her heart died, as the child she was expecting died —before it could be born."

"Oh, how *awful!*" In the darkness Isma never saw the quick movement he made at her shocked exclamation, and the pale glimmer of his white gandoura seemed no nearer when she peered questioningly at him. "How was

he killed? Was it an accident?"

"No," he said somberly, "it was not an accident. He was murdered. Does it shock you?"—as another horrified gasp came from her. "Well, listen—and perhaps you will understand why we of the ben Aissa in particular have no cause to love the foreign domination that is sweeping all our land into its net. My cousin was chief of a tribe who were among the first to throw in their lot with France, but Hosein was made of stuff different from his predecessors, and what they had accepted he could not accept. His views were known; he never made any secret of them, and, as his influence was far-reaching, he was held to be dangerous, a menace to the country, a bad example who was better out of the way. So he—died.

"That there might be no public scandal, it was made to appear the work of a fanatic, moved by a private grievance. In the official report, for they went through the farce of an inquiry, it was referred to as 'a regrettable incident.' But we knew the truth, and Messaouda knew. And since then she—" He stopped short, and, groping for her hand, lifted it quickly to his lips. "I didn't mean to trouble you with our troubles, Miss Crichton," he murmured. "I just wanted to explain what must have seemed so inexplicable to you. It isn't often Messaouda torments herself by listening to poor Hosein's voice, but if his singing wakes you in the night again don't think too hardly of her. It is all she has left of him—except memory." And before Isma could speak he was gone.

Chapter Seven: WIFE OR MISTRESS?

THE BLACK STALLION that was the pick of all Said's young horses was carrying Isma at racing speed over a flat stretch of open country, heading for the narrow winding pass which was the only way from the west through the hills that encircled the great plain where the City of Stones reared its massive bulk up to the sky.

A couple of miles back Said had pulled up to speak to a goatherd who was leisurely driving his flock homeward.

But, impatient of a conversation which, though she now had a working knowledge of Arabic, was carried on too low for her to hear, Isma had started off again, promising to wait for him at the entrance to the pass.

It was four months since she had refused the Sagamore's escort back to the north, and she still did not regret her decision. Nor had Hoyt's fear been fulfilled, for there had been no more raids on the Moroccan border. During the four months, fearing she might be outstaying her welcome, she had once or twice suggested that it was time she brought her visit to an end. But always Messaouda had pressed her to remain; and, happy in the life, still in love with the desert and the peace of its great vastness, in spite of the heat of approaching summer, she had stayed on while week after week slipped past unnoticed.

Heart and soul she had thrown herself into all the sports she had been promised, had even learned to manage the big racing meharis with tolerable ease; but the wonderful horses were her greatest joy, and every day she spent hours in the saddle. With both Said and Messaouda she had scoured the desert, spending nights in distant oases and learning something of the extent of the old Sheik's sway and the numerous tribe he controlled. But the chief of the ben Aissa she saw seldom, and latterly had not seen at all, for illness kept him a prisoner in bed.

With Messaouda in constant attendance on her father, Isma had been thrown more and more into Said's society, and for the last month he had been her sole companion in the daily rides and in the evenings passed in Messaouda's room, where Messaouda herself had only infrequently been able to join them. From him, during those long evenings that had sometimes extended far into the night, Isma had learned much of Arab lore and history; and with him she had further studied the language which, begun under Messaouda's tuition, she had picked up with less difficulty than she had expected. From him, too, she had learned more of the intricate ways of the city; and it was he who, in spite of a half-laughing, half-real protest from Messaouda, had shown her the long underground

passage which, starting from a hidden stairway close to her own room and extending far down into the earth, ran for two miles under the hills, until it terminated in a low cave that looked no different from the numerous hyena dens scattered among the rocks on the hillside.

"Who built it, and for what, no one knows. That's lost, like all the early history of this place," he had told her; "but now it is the ben Aissa's secret, our bolthole—should we ever need one. Once, only my own family and a few of the principal headmen knew of it; but a few years ago, for reasons that don't matter, I showed it to Al Hoyt. And now you too hold our secret in your hands."

"I'm very honored," she had laughed; but, still intent on the bush-screened cleft in the rock that led to the extraordinary subterranean tunnel at which she had gaped and marveled, she had not troubled to ask why she should be so favored.

The existence of this tunnel, and the store chambers it contained, had explained the queer sounds she sometimes heard in her own room; but the haunted square, and the ghost—or whatever it had been—that she had seen there the morning before Hoyt left the city, still remained a mystery. And a mystery she preferred it should remain. One experience of the kind was enough, and more than enough, to satisfy any leanings she might have had toward the occult. Now, like the ben Aissa themselves, she avoided the sinister little square.

Unsolved too was the mystery of Ishak's reappearance that same morning. From remarks made later, she had discovered that neither Said nor Messaouda knew of his return or thought that he was anywhere but where they supposed him to be, and long since she had given up worrying about it.

He was still in the north, where he had gone with Hoyt, and in the north Isma hoped he would stay—for as long as she continued in the city. Nor did she hear regret expressed by anyone at his absence. Though he was their nearest blood relation, neither Said nor Messaouda had any affection for him; and once, speaking of him, Mes-

saouda had referred with bitterness to the fact that should Said die still unmarried, or die without leaving a son to succeed him, Ishak would be chief of the ben Aissa.

But there was no thought of Ishak or any disturbing thought in Isma's mind this morning, as she sat with head bent forward and tight-gripped knees, while the wind whistled past her ears and her eyes danced with the sheer joy of life that was in her. For never had she ridden such a horse—so smooth, so swift, and so sure-footed. Why had Said kept this paragon in the background until today, she wondered. Then, looking forward, she gave a little laugh of amusement that was not untinged with doubt.

The pass was very near now. When they reached the clump of palms that stood like sentinels before the entrance, where she had promised to wait, would the paragon be the perfect gentleman he had been ever since the morning; or was he going to develop ideas of his own and rush the dangerous passage before she could bring him to a halt? Almost she wished he would give trouble, for if any criticism was possible he was just the least bit too sweet-tempered; and, perversely, she was spoiling for a fight. But if it came to that, and they went to pieces on the rocks—well, Said wasn't going to be very grateful to her for breaking the legs of the best horse he had ever bred.

Bending lower she took a firmer grip, and whistled, the whistle his master had taught her; and, with a snort and a heave, the galloping stallion slowed to a canter, checking gently until he slithered to a stop close to the first palm tree.

With a murmured "You darling," Isma climbed down from the high-peaked saddle, crooned over him for a moment or two, while she rubbed his velvety nose, then flung the reins loose, leaving him standing as he had been trained to stand, and threw herself full length on the sand, to lie staring with longing eyes at the horse she coveted, and wonder how she could induce his proud owner to part with him. For proud he was, she reminded herself with a grin, the proudest thing perhaps the desert had

ever produced—but not, thank goodness, of his own powers and achievements, though he might very well be forgiven if he was. She was still wondering when she heard the soft thud of approaching hoofbeats, and sat up hastily as Said swept alongside.

His dismounting was a lengthier affair than hers had been. The horse he was riding today had neither the tractability nor the sweet temper of the stallion she wanted for her own; and, already fretted by one enforced halt, he was in no mind to submit to another. For a full ten minutes, with the unstinted admiration she always gave to one who excelled in what she could do so well herself, Isma watched the protracted struggle between brute force and human skill and endurance. She had ridden some nasty horses in her time, had seen David Arne handle even more vicious ones, but never had she seen a better fight than this. And if she winced once or twice at the bloodstains on the horse's flanks and Said's sharp, shovel-shaped stirrups, it was with the remembrance that such punishment was rare with him. At last he swung down and, lighting a cigarette, came to sit beside her.

"It was the goats," he explained laughingly. "Funny thing, but he's loathed the smell of a goat ever since he was foaled." Then, with a wave of his cigarette toward the black stallion: "Well, what's the verdict? You said you'd tell me tonight, and I guess it's as near night now as makes no difference," he added.

Isma heaved a deep sigh of mingled rapture and envy. "He's perfect," she breathed, "classes ahead of the Gadfly. I hate to say it, I thought the little 'Fly was unbeatable, but it's truth. I've never ridden such a horse. You simply must let me buy him." She had meant to be much more diplomatic, not blurt it out like that, and all hope of getting the horse seemed gone when Said slowly shook his head.

"I can't sell him," he said quietly. "I never sell my horses. But you needn't let that worry you," he went on, looking not at her but at the sand he was scooping up and trickling through his fingers. "He's yours already, was

yours from the moment you put your foot into the stirrup this morning."

Isma's smiling face clouded, and a wave of color rushed over it from chin to brow.

"Oh, don't be silly," she exclaimed with sharpness that was half disappointment, half embarrassment. "You know perfectly well I can't accept a valuable horse like that as a gift, or take any gift from you," she added quickly, determined that he should know her views on that subject once and for all, lest any other presents might be offered.

Imperturbably, Said racked up another handful of sand.

"Why not," he murmured, "since everything I have is yours?"

Very far yet from understanding, thinking he was merely indulging in the usual oriental hyperbole, Isma gave a little light laugh.

"Better say it in Arabic," she scoffed; "it doesn't sound very convincing in English."

"Do you need convincing?" His voice was still expressionless, but in his eyes, lifted suddenly to hers, she saw with utter astonishment and dismay what sent her quickly to her feet, her one thought to get away before he said what must inevitably put an end to the frank comradeship that had existed up to now, even if it did not altogether destroy the friendship that had been so pleasant. But, quicker than she, he followed, slipping between her and the waiting horses.

"Isma—listen!" All the pent-up love in his heart was in his voice now, and swiftly he caught her wrists in his slim brown hands; and his touch told her even more than the passionate ardor of his tone. So had David's touch once made her shrink, she remembered, and, shivering, tried to wrench her wrists free.

"No, no. I can't listen—I don't want to listen. And you're hurting me—let me go. Please, *please* let me go."

But the pressure of his fingers slackened only a little.

"I can't let you go—yet," he cried. "I can't be silent any longer. You've got to listen to me now, got to know the love I've kept hidden all these months—love that has

changed everything for me, that has made me long for what I never thought of before. At first it was only a pictured face, a sketch I stole from Cassie Hoyt's portfolio. But I loved that face as I had never loved any real woman, and with all the faith that is in me I prayed to Allah that some day my pictured lady, in all her living, breathing loveliness, might come to lie in my arms, and bring me the joy that only she could give.

"Yet with all my faith I was afraid—for I didn't even know your name. But when I saw you at Denes Abbey—and I never thought you would be there, how should I?—when you came into the room that night, then I knew that Allah had heard my prayers, and that for some purpose, greater perhaps even than my longing, He had always meant that we should come together. And when you gave me your hand—why, I just forgot all the other folks standing around, and it was all I could do to keep myself from telling my love right there.

"As it was, Al told me afterward, I made a big enough hole in my manners, sitting staring at you all the rest of the evening like a bear with a sore head. But if you'd known what I was thinking—Isma, my love, my love. My lady that I worship. My goddess I would make a queen—" He stopped abruptly, frowning, as if suddenly conscious that he had said too much. Then: "Why not?" he muttered. "Why should I not tell you everything?" And still holding her wrists, heedless of her struggles, of her interruptions that ceased at last because he would not listen, he burst into rapid and impassioned speech, telling her of the great rising among the native chiefs which, in secret preparation for years, was now slowly coming to maturity—a widespread revolt, with the ben Aissa at its head, and the chief of the ben Aissa the already acknowledged king of the new Arab dominion that should be; telling her too of Hoyt's first meeting with the brother and sister in America, and of the interest and sympathy that had induced him to take up their cause and place himself and his big fortune at their disposal.

With feelings that almost approached horror—for she

liked him so well, would always like him for his great kindness to her—Isma heard how the Sagamore had duped the government in the north; how for years, except during the Great War, he had been flooding the country with guns and munitions, under cover of the archeological pursuits he used as a screen to his activities.

And, hearing, she stood aghast, not only at the full confirmation of her early doubts and suspicions, but at the stupendous folly of the ben Aissa and their associates. She knew now why visitors came so frequently to the city; knew now what was the work that took so many hours of Messaouda's time, the reason of the nightly conferences in her room while Hoyt was with them. When she made herself listen again, Said's voice had dropped to a lower, less excited key.

"For years we have worked and waited," he was saying, "and at last our opportunity has come. They have lost men and money in their own struggle for independence, and never will we have such a chance again to strike out for ourselves. All his life it has been my father's hope—his daily, hourly prayer. Ever since the time of Bou Amama he has been working for this."

With an effort Isma dragged her chaotic thoughts together.

"And Bou Amama was taken, and died in exile in Morocco," she reminded him, history he himself had told her.

"Bou Amama left too much to chance," he replied quickly. "We are better organized this time. We have more money, and more modern equipment than he had."

"But even so, it's madness—absolute madness," she exclaimed, all that had led up to this amazing disclosure momentarily forgotten in her anxiety for a people she had come to like and admire. "They've a big force left, in spite of the War, more money than you think; and in the end they'll crush you as they crushed him. Oh, why can't you see it's impossible, hopelessly impossible?"

"Nothing is impossible that has right behind it."

"What right is there—in rebellion? And even if you are outside their jurisdiction—if you really are—for the chiefs

who are in this with you, it would be rebellion."

"What right have they to make slaves of us?" he retorted. And as she stood silent, not knowing what to say, he caught her imprisoned hands up to his lips. "Whether we win or lose, Allah will decide," he said hoarsely; "but, win or lose, I shall still have you—and you are more to me than anything else in the world. Isma, beloved, haven't I waited long enough? Won't you tell me now when you will come to me?"

That he was sincere, that he loved her with all the fierce, tempestuous love that only the burning sun of the desert can put into the hearts of men, she was forced even against her inclination to believe. But that he should speak so confidently, be apparently so sure of her compliance, brought a crushing sense of indignity that roused her to quick and furious rage.

"I don't know what you mean," she burst out, the bewilderment in her eyes changed to blazing indignation as she tried once more to wrench her wrists free. "Aren't you taking just a little too much for granted? And let go my hands at once, please. I've told you half a dozen times already—*you're hurting me.*"

For a moment he stood as if stunned, staring at her almost stupidly before he slowly released the bruised wrists she thrust behind her back out of his sight and her own.

"You don't—care?" he muttered dully.

"*No,*" she answered with pitiless emphasis, for the burning anger and resentment she felt was still too strong for her to be touched by any other feeling. "I've never cared for anyone—in the way you mean, and never shall."

"Then all these months—"

"I was your friend," she broke in. "If you thought anything else you had no right, and you made a big mistake."

With a sudden violent movement that made her involuntarily give back a pace, he straightened up, drawing his breath in sharply.

"A mistake," he whispered. And all at once the handsome face, whose every expression she had thought was known to her, seemed to become the face of a devil in-

carnate. But the look was gone in an instant, and the next moment he laughed, a soft little laugh that was faintly disdainful. "A mistake?" he repeated suavely. "When I ask you again, perhaps you will find that it is you who have made the mistake."

Too angry still to realize anything but her own anger, his suavity and his cool hint that the matter was not yet ended merely put fresh fire to her rage.

"You needn't trouble," she said shortly. "I have given you my answer. You will get no other from me."

"That remains to be seen." His tone was just as suave, but there was something in his cold smile that checked the retort that was rising to her lips, that for the first time made her feel afraid—a strange indefinite fear that sent an icy shiver rippling down her spine. Then through sheer panic she lost her temper completely.

"How dare you think—what you thought?" she stormed. "And if you can't behave like a gentleman now, you know what *I* think; if you're going to act like an unmannerly savage, you'll make me more sorry than I am I ever came to this country. You've made me hate it—and you."

But long before she was through the narrow pass, she repented the angry words, to which he had listened with the same cold smile and without attempting either to stop or follow her when she rode away. Because he had had the impertinence to assume that she was his for the asking was no reason for forgetting her own manners. She could have made her feelings quite clear without the loss of her temper and, with it, a certain loss of dignity that was humiliating to remember. Yet how could she help it?

Resentment burned up in her again; and, carried beyond all thought and consideration, she spurred the galloping stallion to greater speed across the open plain, trying vainly not to listen for the sound of following hoofs. What right had he to think so slightingly of her, she kept on repeating; what right had he, an Arab, to think of her in that way at all? The idea that he might care for her, that the friendship that had been so pleasant might end like this had never once entered her head. She

had never dreamed of its possibility. But it had happened —and now what was she to do, where was she to go? Was she never to get away from the thing she loathed and which seemed to pursue her everywhere? It had driven her from England, was driving her now from this place, where at least she had thought she would find peace. Even in America— But not one of those men in America; not David—never, never David—had insulted her as this man had. It all came back to that. To presume so much, to imagine he had only to cock his little finger—the colossal, infernal cheek of it! And perhaps he had even dared to think she had come here for the very purpose! Writhing at the thought, Isma spurred the great stallion again, urging him up the long ramp at a breakneck pace.

Her rage had reached white heat when at last she burst in on Messaouda who was sitting in her usual seat and, as usual, busily writing; and the mass of letters and documents, whose significance was no longer a secret to her, only serve to increase her indignation. Not pausing to choose her words, she rushed to the point:

"I want to go home. I've loved being here—you've been most awfully kind to me—but—but I can't stay any longer. I want to go at once, please, as soon as you can arrange for me." Breathlessly, childishly almost, she blurted it out, and Messaouda looked up with a little smile.

"Why, my dear—" she began, but as her glance met Isma's her smile faded, and a look that was wonder, disappointment, and the dawning of faint hostility, all combined, came into her dark eyes that until now had always been so affectionate.

"Has Said asked you to marry him?" Startled by the unexpected question, but relieved at being spared awkward explanations, Isma gave a laconic affirmative.

"And you have—refused?" There was a tremor in Messaouda's voice this time. And as another "Yes" came, short and uncompromising as the first, her look of hostility deepened. "But why?" she said sharply. "If you did not care for him, why did you make him think in England that you cared so much about his country? Why did

you come to us, when you must have known that he loved you?"

"I didn't know," Isma returned hotly. "It's not a thing I ever think about. I wanted to travel, to get off the beaten track, and it was the country, not your brother, I came to see. If I'd had the least idea—" she broke off, her face flushing under Messaouda's patently incredulous stare. "Oh, it's no good trying to explain, if you can't understand," she added, swallowing an angry sob.

"I'm afraid I don't understand," Messaouda replied frigidly. "Whether you meant it or not, you've given Said every encouragement. You've let him talk with you, ride with you alone, be with you alone for whole days at a stretch. Do you think he is made of ice—like your Englishmen?"

At any other time Isma would have laughed at the comparison, but at the moment laughter was very far from her, and the implied censure made her face flush deeper.

"I've told you I never think of that sort of thing," she said indignantly; "and even if I did, I—" Again she stopped short, turning to the window to hide what she felt sure must be plainly written on her face. It was impossible to tell Messaouda, who was his sister and an Arab herself, that, if the thought of marriage was horrible and revolting to her, marriage with a native was ten times more horrible and revolting.

"I'm desperately sorry this has happened," she went on after a pause, but still keeping her eyes fixed on the window; "and I'd be more sorry if I thought it was my fault. But it isn't my fault, whatever you may think. If I'd known there was any chance of it, I'd have gone back with Mr. Hoyt. But it's no good talking about that. All I can do now is to go as quickly as you can make arrangements.

"I'm afraid I can't take you," replied Messaouda. "My father is still too ill for me to leave him." She spoke even more frigidly and distantly than before, and in every word, though she studiously avoided looking at her, Isma could sense deep resentment and anger—and anger began

to stir again in her own heart, but she managed to keep it down.

"Then will you please wireless to Mr. Hoyt, or to Cassie, if he is still in America, and ask them to send an escort for me. I'd be quite all right with Doud," she said.

"I'm sorry," was the cool reply, "but that is quite impossible too. The radio is out of commission. We have had no messages from the north for weeks, nor have we been able to get any messages through."

The fear, only a vague presentiment then, which had unconsciously been growing in her ever since she had leaped on her horse and galloped away from Said an hour before, rushed over Isma again with renewed force, and every vestige of color was gone from her face as she wheeled round to confront Messaouda with clenched hands and heaving breast.

"Are you telling me the truth?" she gasped.

The Arab girl's eyes flashed.

"Why should I lie to you?" she said harshly. "Why should I want you to stay if you're only going to break Said's heart?" Abruptly she rose to her feet, her lips compressed as though to keep back what still struggled for utterance; but her look told Isma, as plainly as if she had said it, that, as far as she was concerned, the close friendship that had sprung up between them was at an end, and that never would she forgive this slight to the brother she adored. Then, with head still held high and eyes still flashing wrathfully, she went swiftly down the room, pausing at the door to fling back over her shoulder: "My father is very weak tonight, so you will excuse me if you have to eat alone," before she swept through the curtains, leaving Isma a prey to thoughts and imaginings that every moment grew darker and more terrifying.

Desperately she strove to put them out of her mind, but thoughts would not be controlled, and hour after hour she wrestled with herself, with the fear she still tried to believe was a thing beyond all possibility. Yet hour by hour, reason as she would, the dreadful fear persisted, until she started at the sound of every footfall, every voice

that echoed from the courtyard below. And that night she never slept.

For a week, offering no excuse, since none was asked, she scarcely left her own rooms; and of Said, during that week, she saw nothing. Whether he had left the city or was merely keeping out of her way, she neither knew nor cared. She only prayed every morning that she might not see him, and thanked God every night for another day's respite.

But she knew it was only a postponement, that sooner or later, as he had told her, he would speak again. And there were moments when, her nerves strained to breaking point, she almost longed for the interview she dreaded.

Then one evening, quite suddenly, with no more intimation than a hurried word from Fatima, he came, just after she had finished the solitary dinner to which she was growing so accustomed; and one glance at his face warned her in what mood he had come. Never before had she seen in him any likeness to his cousin, but tonight the resemblance was striking. Catching her lip between her teeth to hide its trembling, she forced herself to meet the keen penetrating eyes that, for the first time, she saw flaming with the look she had so often seen in Ishak's.

New to her, too, was the arrogant swing of his supple body as he strode across the room, his burnoose thrown back, a half-smoked cigarette dangling from one hand.

The week had changed him almost beyond recognition. Of the man she had known at Denes Abbey, of the courteous host of only a few days ago, there was no longer any trace. This was an Arab, pure and simple, seething with all an Arab's instincts, cruel and pitiless as one of his own desert hawks; and, in terror that made her want to scream, Isma waited for what was to come. Nor was she kept long in suspense. Standing before her with set, unsmiling lips, without the quick perfunctory salaam he had never before omitted, he spoke abruptly, and with unusual curt directness.

"Have you thought over what I said to you last week?"

Wearily she shook her head, her shaking fingers clutching at the silken cushions of the divan on which she sat.

"What is there to think over?" she muttered. "I told you then. I can't say anything different now. It's no good asking me. I can't marry you."

"Why?" he demanded fiercely. "Because I am an Arab? Do you think it an insult that an Arab should love you?" And before she could evade him she was lying crushed against his breast, shuddering under the burning kisses that seemed to scorch through to her very soul.

Frantically she struggled to free herself, but closer and closer he drew her to him, until her body ached with the merciless pressure of his strong arms, until at last a gasping cry was forced from her bruised and quivering lips:

"Let me go. Oh, Said, let me go."

"Let you go?" Closer still he strained her. "Do you think I will give you up now? Do you think I will let you go to some other man's arms when I have held you, like this, in mine?" And once more his kisses fell like rain on her face and neck and hair.

Yet even in the madness of his passion he could see the loathing he inspired; and, as another wailing entreaty burst from her, an entreaty he knew was for more than just her immediate release, his face, which had softened somewhat, hardened again. Roughly he thrust her from him.

"It's impossible," he said thickly. "Even if I didn't want you, it would be impossible. I've told you too much; you know too much for the safety of our plans, for the safety of all of us, for me to let you go now. Whether you wish it or not, you will have to stay here."

For an instant the floor seemed to rock under her feet, and she swayed dizzily.

"But you can't keep me." Chokingly she uttered the words she still tried to believe. "You can't keep me here."

"Can't I?" His eyes swept her from head to foot, hungry eyes of desire that sent a wave of physical sickness through her. "I think you will find I both can and will. But I am not going to force you to marry me. The conditions under which you remain will rest in your own hands," he added, but there was a mocking note in his

voice that killed the sudden wild hope that had surged in her. Fearfully, furtively, she glanced at him.

"What do you mean?" she whispered.

"I mean," he said slowly, "that you can choose for yourself whether you will be wife—or just a woman of my house," and, as she shrank back, flinching as if he had struck her: "Probably you think the one as derogatory to you as the other," he went on, with a hard, bitter little laugh. "I can't help that. But be very sure of this—it will certainly be one or the other."

Her heart seemed to have stopped beating, and, white to the lips, her face gone suddenly pinched and old-looking, she stood for a moment fighting for breath. Then, in agony that drove her beyond fear, desperately, recklessly, she flung her scorn at him:

"You can say a thing so foul and still pretend that you love me? You can stoop to do anything so—*vile?*"

A dark wave of color rolled over his bronzed cheek. But it was anger more than shame, and the look he threw at her sent her cowering on to the divan, her new-found courage gone, wondering if he would kill her. But he only laughed again, more bitterly than before.

"Vile—am I?" he sneered. "And whose fault is it?" Once more his gaze swept her, where she lay huddled among the cushions, and now the fierce hunger in his smoldering eyes was mingled with a fiercer contempt. "It is women like you who make such men as I am—vile," he cried, with scorn even greater than hers. "While it amuses you, you can forget the barrier your prejudice raises between us, and you will talk with us, accept us on terms of equality—even as friends. But if one of us has the unhappiness to love you, is fool enough to speak of it, then you remember your prejudice and show us what you really think we are—beings of a lower order, a little above the beasts perhaps, but not much. And in your fancied superiority you cannot even differentiate. Arabs, who came from the same Aryan stock as you do, or Negroes, who since the beginning of time have been our slaves—we are all one to you, just niggers, mud to be trodden under your feet.

"Even you, *you* who have lived among us, who know the difference— When I spoke of my love last week you looked at me as if I had been—Lakadha. Does it occur to you to think what I might have done to you at that moment, when my love almost turned to hatred, had I been a man of his race? You would have had no choice offered you then. Because I am what I am, I have given you a choice. But also because I am what I am, I can go no further than that.

"Did you never think, all these months, what your companionship might mean to me? Never think what I might be led to hope when you seemed so happy and contented here? You could have gone when Al went, but you chose to stay—to tempt me as I think no man was ever tempted before. I was not a nigger to you then, but an equal, welcome when I came, even sought for when I did not come. Do you blame me that I thought you willing—that I thought I had only to ask?

"And now—when I do not amuse you any longer, when I know that you were only playing with me—do you think that I—*I* am one to come and go at a woman's whim, to obey a woman's pleasure? By Allah, no! You have had your day, and your day is past. It is *my* pleasure you will consider now, *my* will you will obey in future. And, obeying, you can remember that you brought this on yourself. You made me love you, more, a thousand times more than I had loved you before; and for no one on earth, to no one on earth will I ever let you go now. What you will be to me, you can tell me when you have made up your mind. Only choose quickly—lest my patience fail before you have made your choice."

The sound of his footsteps had long since died away before she dared to lift her head and look with haggard, stricken eyes round the room she would never feel safe in again. And, strangely, it was only of the accusations he had hurled at her that she could think first. It wasn't true, it wasn't true, she kept on whispering. Foolish, unthinking, perhaps she had been; but she had never tempted him, never tried to win his love, never even thought

that he might love her. But her whispers ceased as a shudder of terrible apprehension suddenly went through her. What were his accusations compared with the appalling thing he proposed!

Again the room seemed to swim round her; and, fighting as she had fought before against the waves of nausea that were turning her sick and faint, she staggered up and, going draggingly to the window, wrenched open the shutter. But the cool air blowing in brought her no relief, and, moaning, she buried her face in her hands while shudder after shudder shook her from head to foot. This horror that was coming to her, to *her*—was it possible that just want of thought could bring such awful punishment? Arab though he was, justified though he might think himself to be, how could any man so change, hate so bitterly what he had once loved, that nothing remained but the lust of torture and revenge? And here he was all-powerful. There was no escape for her, or from the choice that was only a mockery; no one to whom she could turn for help, not even Messaouda—for Messaouda would not help her now. In this teeming city she was utterly alone, utterly at his mercy—and for his very pride's sake he would be merciless. When it pleased him— Oh, God, if she could only die before! When it pleased him, he would do what he had threatened.

With another pitiful little moan she slipped to the floor, the tears she had not yet given way to coming at last.

Chapter Eight: CAPTIVE LOVE

I WILL LIFT UP MINE EYES *unto the hills from whence cometh my help.*

High above the city that for her had become a veritable city of stones, a prison from which there was no possibility of escape, Isma stood beside the whitewashed parapet of the little observation platform, slow tears gathering in her eyes as she whispered the words she had so often sung in the village church at Kings Crichton, without a thought then that they could ever have any real signifi-

cance for her.

Yet how many times, she wondered with quivering lips, had she lifted up her eyes to these hills, hoping and praying for the help that never came? And, now that she was beyond help, how many more times in the hopeless years that stretched ahead would she climb to this quiet place, where no one but she ever seemed to come, to wrestle with the black despair that sometimes almost tempted her to fling herself down on the rocks beneath and end a life that could never be other than desolate and unhappy? It would be so easy. Here, within reach of her hand, was the weak spot in the railing Said had warned her of long ago, in the time that now seemed to belong to another existence. Little more than a touch, and then—

Shuddering she drew back and, dropping onto the rough wooden bench drawn close to the parapet, buried her face in her hands. Not that—yet, not while he still left her free. And how much longer would he leave her free who now, more than ever, was his to take when he chose?

Another shudder went through her as her mind traveled back to the night, four months before, when, to escape the shameful alternative he had offered, she had spoken the words that had made her the wife of Said ben Aissa.

What those words were, or of the ceremonies that had followed, she had still no clear remembrance. It had all been like a dream, horrible and unreal; and complete understanding of what she had done had dawned on her only when she found herself back in her own room, alone, and listening fearfully for the coming of the man who would be master of her, body and soul.

But formalities of which she knew little had detained him, and for hours she had waited, her clothes clinging wet to her shivering limbs, her hands pressed over her ears to try to deaden the sounds of the shrill pipes and banging tom-toms which, with constant discharges of rifle shots, had been going on all evening and it would continue, she knew, to mock her in her misery until the dawn. For though a few of the more rigid among the el-

ders of the people had been adverse to his choice of a Roumia, a European woman, for his wife, the bulk of the population had seen only cause for rejoicing in the long-deferred, long-hoped-for marriage of their chief's son; and the whole city, blazing with lights from top to bottom, had been given up to unrestrained feasting and festivity.

In her agony, all at once like a blinding flash, had come sudden self-realization, sudden self-understanding that had wrung a cry of anguish from her. If it had been David who was coming—David for whose step she was listening! Too late she had learned the love that, all her life, unknown to her, had lain smoldering in her heart, love so dominating and absolute now that even the fear which had terrified her since childhood had gone as though it had never been. And, every fiber in her being crying out for him, she had known that, if it could only have been he, it would have been heaven on earth to do his will, and joy unutterable, if so great a mercy were ever granted her, to give him the child he wanted.

With another bitter cry she had fallen prone on the thick rug to weep heartbrokenly until she had no tears left. And so, when he came at last, Said had found her.

Too physically exhausted to struggle, she had not attempted to resist when he lifted her into his arms. Infinitely gentle though his clasp had been, remembrance of their last interview alone had made her tremble at more than just the thought of what his presence meant; and, with closed eyes, her fingers gripped in the silken coverings of the bed, she had waited in fearful apprehension for a repetition of the violence that had finally crushed her spirit only a few days before.

But his words, when at length he spoke, had been very different from what she had expected. In short broken sentences, retracting all the accusations he had made, he had implored her forgiveness, begged for her love, for at least compliance with the marriage he had forced on her; then, his head sunk on the pillow beside hers, his voice thick with emotion, he had urged his own love, pleading the desperate longing which, grown stronger than him-

self, had driven him to the course he had taken, and beseeching her, since she was his wife, to have pity on the husband who had come not as a master but as a suppliant.

"Not for me only, but for my people," he had whispered at last, and raising her suddenly, he had flung out a hand toward the open window. "Do you hear them, down there in the streets?" he had cried. "Do you know what they are singing? It is the Song of Life—the life that, if Allah wills, they pray shall be begun tonight; the life that, through us, with Allah's blessing, will mean their salvation. Ever since I grew to manhood they have been waiting for this, praying for a child to be born of my blood—the blood that has ruled them from the time they first became a tribe. For years they have murmured because I took no wife, because I failed to give them their desire. And because I can love no other woman, will marry no other woman but you, on you and you alone depends the fate, the whole future of the ben Aissa. If I fail them now, after my death they will no longer be a tribe, for none but a son of mine can hold them as we of my family have held them; to none but a son of mine will they give the allegiance that Ishak hopes to get." With a deep sob he had drawn her closer, straining her to him convulsively. "Oh, light of my eyes, my wife, my wife, for their sake as well as mine—be kind to me—tonight."

But it was David's voice she had seemed to hear, David's eyes that had seemed to look with such desperate pleading into hers, and, his name bursting from her lips, she had torn herself free and fled like a mad thing. Before she reached the curtains of the anteroom, Said had caught her, every tender line wiped from his face as he dragged her back with force that had wrenched the thin silk from her shoulders.

"So in that too, you lied to me," he had snarled; "you who told me you had never cared for any man—and never would."

"I didn't lie," she had sobbed. "I didn't know—until now."

"Then now, in my arms, you can forget it again," he

had retorted with a little savage laugh; "for, by Allah, I will kill you rather than you should lie in his."

In her extremity, passionately, she had entreated him to give her death that was preferable to his embraces. The same terrible look she had seen once before had swept over his face, and for a moment she had thought, had prayed, that he would take her at her word. Then little by little the fury in his eyes had changed to an expression of dull suffering, and slowly, very slowly, his hands had slipped from her, and a few moments later, lying face downward on the rug where she had fallen, she had heard the clang of the outer door closing behind him.

The evening shadows were beginning to gather when Isma lifted her head, to look, with weary brooding eyes, over the wide plain, while she thought of the weeks and months that had followed; of the dread that, waking and sleeping, had gone with her ever since; of the difficulties of her life under its new conditions. For, not a guest any more, but a member of the family, her altered status had brought changes, and restrictions, which were a constant galling reminder that she was no longer her own mistress.

Whether the household, or even Messaouda, knew or did not know of the real relations that existed between her and Said, she had no means of discovering. From their behavior and their inscrutable faces she could learn nothing, for the subtle secrecy of the Arab mind was still beyond her comprehension. Said himself, and the attitude he adopted toward her, was a puzzle that often made her wonder how many sides there were to his character. For weeks, despising herself for cowardice, but unable to conquer her physical fear of him, she had flinched every time he came near her; but there had been no recurrence of the violence that had so terrified her before, and it was not he nearly so much as Messaouda who created the difficulties she had to contend with.

Yet the fact of his ownership was made very clear. Though he still left her free, in no other particular was she ever allowed to forget—if she could have forgotten—

that she was his wife. With the right that was his, he exercised a husband's prerogative when he would; and, her rooms no longer a sanctuary, she never knew at what hour he might come, sometimes to talk, with almost the same freedom as before their marriage, of local or domestic happenings, sometimes to sit in moody silence, smoking cigarette after cigarette, looking at her until his steady stare and the knowledge of what lay in his watching eyes tore her strained nerves to tatters; and, quivering every time he moved, she would wonder if the limit of his forbearance had been reached at last, if it would be tonight—

But day had succeeded day without her dread being substantiated, and during the last two months his frequent absence from the city had given her intervals of comparative ease.

As Hoyt had predicted, the Moroccans had stirred themselves to avenge their dead; and, to check the sporadic raiding that had broken out in consequence, for weeks at a time, in spite of Messaouda's vehement protests, he was away riding the border with the patrols he had instituted. Yet his every return was a cause of further apprehension, for each time he came back she saw the hunger look written plainer on his face, and each time he rode away again it was with greater reluctance.

The last time, coming to take leave of her the evening before, he had stayed in her room almost until the dawn; and for hours afterward, too unnerved to sleep, she had lain trembling with reaction from the long strain, still seeming to feel the pressure of his encircling arms, the scorching flame of his kisses on her lips.

Would kisses alone content him the next time?

Isma's hands clenched tighter on the edge of the wooden bench. It wasn't any use trying not to think of it. The position between them was growing more and more impossible. It couldn't go on. Sooner or later the scruple, or whatever it was, that stayed him, would be forgotten or ignored. Sooner or later he would take her, as he had the right. And after that, even if she had the courage or the cowardice to go on living, all that had ever been Isma

Crichton would be dead.

Blinding tears welled in her eyes again, and impatiently she brushed them away. Tears couldn't help her or undo what she had done. By her own foolishness she had brought this misery on herself. She had had her chance of happiness, greater happiness perhaps than fell to the lot of most women, and deliberately, of her own free will, she had thrown it away. The desolation and suffering that had come instead was her own doing, nobody's fault but hers. But, oh, dear God, if the suffering could only be hers alone, if only David had not to suffer too! And he would never know that she loved him, never know of the awful remorse that was to be her punishment until the death she longed for came to free her. He would never know. For she would never see him again, never be able to tell him. And if in time he ever learned how she was living—he would think she had been willing, that it had been her own choice, and his love would turn to scorn. His scorn! Oh, God, if she'd only done what he asked that day in London; if only the year that was passed could be given to her to live over again, that she might go to him and beg for the love that was more than life to her now. David!

It was the first stirrings of the cold evening breeze that roused her, half an hour later, to glance quickly at the setting sun and then sink back on the bench with a little sigh of relief. There was time yet, twenty minutes at least, before she need leave this quiet place that was her haven of refuge. For days she had been feeling tired and listless, and today, after that scene with Messaouda, she wanted rest and quiet more than ever. It had been a hateful scene, and her nerves were still jangling like piano wires. And then here, instead of giving them a chance to steady down, like a fool she had let her misery get the upper hand again, had let herself cry as she had not cried for weeks, and now her head was throbbing as if a tom-tom was beating inside it.

Shivering from time to time, for she had brought no wrap to cover the thin riding clothes she still wore for preference, though it was long since she had ridden or

had any desire to ride, Isma sat staring into space, striving to keep her mind a blank. But she knew the moments were speeding, that very soon she would have to return to the palace to face Messaouda in her wrath again; and, with another tired sigh, she took her aching head in her hands, wondering how she was to carry out the new duty that had fallen to her lot when Messaouda objected so furiously.

Since the first night—the same night, two weeks ago, that Said had gone back to the border—she had been aware of her opposition, and day by day she had felt the storm gathering. Today it had burst. And why? Why should Messaouda resent the small help she was able to give the old Sheik in his illness?

Was it her fault that, heaven above knew why, the poor old man had become attached to her, wanted her to be with him? Was it her fault that months spent nursing her own father had made her handy in a sickroom? And, glad as she was to be of use, for anything that distracted her mind, even for a few moments, from her own miserable thoughts, it wasn't any easy task when his whole conversation was Said, Said, and everlastingly Said. And to respond as she must respond, to pretend what she did not feel, so that he might be left undisturbed in his happy illusion that all was well with the son he adored, was becoming more and more of a strain. Why, oh, why had she ever learned the language that alone made her attendance on him possible? And it wasn't she who had suggested that she should take over the night nursing—she had learned by now not to make suggestions. The order, for it amounted to no less, had come from the Sheik himself; so why couldn't Messaouda let it be? It was only to spare her, who had all the business of this ghastly rebellion on her hands when Said was away, to give her more time to rest, that had made the Sheik express the wish that had raised such a turmoil; and there would be a bigger turmoil if he found his wishes disregarded. Ill as he was, figurehead in many ways though he might be, he still expected unquestioning obedience from his household; and, not knowing the cause, the weight of his displeasure would fall on

her shoulders.

That didn't matter. It would only be another difficulty added to many greater. What did matter was that he was dying, and it was criminal that he should be worried without reason at such a time. If Said had been at home this trouble wouldn't have arisen. Messaouda kept a hold over her tongue when he was within hearing. But he wasn't at home, wasn't expected for several days yet; and, though in some ways life was easier when he was in the city, she dreaded his return too much to wish for it.

Perplexedly Isma ran her fingers through her wind-whipped hair, heedless of the cold while she wrestled with the problem that seemed insoluble. How was she to manage tonight, how even reach the Sheik's room, if she found the door barred as Messaouda had threatened? It was nothing but absurd jealousy. Messaouda's furious "You have taken Said from me, but my father you shall not take," hurled at her this afternoon, proved that. Yet it had been her refusal to marry Said that had changed Messaouda's liking into hatred, and if she had loved him, had married him willingly, might not Messaouda in time have become as jealous and as antagonistic as she was now? It was more than likely. Jealousy seemed to be an integral part of the nature of these people, and Messaouda's passionate love for Said was not of the kind that would suffer any rival gladly. But that was beside the question. She had not married Said willingly, and Messaouda knew it. And how much more did Messaouda know, that she continued to hate her so bitterly? Would she never show any more consideration than she did now? Would her hatred go on for all time, until, perhaps—

Desperately Isma strove to put thought from her. Of the future she dared not think. The present was hard enough to bear without torturing herself with what might be. And perhaps, for it was only fair to give her the benefit of the doubt, perhaps Messaouda's constant irritability was not only due to herself but in some part to the uncertainty of the political situation at the moment?

For a few moments, her mind drawn from her own trou-

bles, Isma pondered the question. Though neither Said nor his sister ever spoke directly to her of their plans, they spoke to each other in her hearing with complete openness; and she knew that the preparations for the great rising, that had been going forward so smoothly when Hoyt was with them, had, a few weeks later, sustained an unexpected and incomprehensible check. With their southern and eastern associates there was apparently no hitch. The trouble was in the north, where Ishak was taking control while Hoyt was in America; and from Ishak only infrequent and unsatisfactory news was being received. Twice, in response to urgent messages from Said, he had sent mechanics down to the city to repair the fault in the wireless; but the defect had evidently been beyond their skill, for it was still out of order, and letters, carried even by fast camels, took long to come and go. So matters seemed to have reached a deadlock that would continue in all probability until Hoyt returned. With difficulties nearer home to occupy his time and attention, Said showed no particular uneasiness at the temporary breakdown of their schemes.

It was Messaouda who fretted, and more and more often Isma heard the sound of the gramophone coming from the room she never entered now, and guessed that Messaouda was on her knees, before the portrait she had once seen uncovered, praying for the success of the venture that was to bring retribution on her husband's murderers. Ardent patriot though she was, to her the preservation of the integrity of her own tribe and the freeing of the rest of the country were matters of secondary importance. Her chief desire was to avenge Hosein, and for that purpose she had lived ever since his death. Brooding over it, growing more and more impatient as the years slipped by and her desire seemed to come no nearer, the sorrow which at first had strengthened her character had become a bitterness that was warping her whole nature, that made her now a very different woman from the one Cassie Hoyt had known only a few years before.

Again Isma brought her wandering thoughts back to

the present. Messaouda's history was terrible, and it was perhaps natural she should have grown bitter, but thinking of it wouldn't help to solve tonight's difficulty—and the sun was very near the top of the hills now.

A sob rose in her throat, and once more she buried her face in her hands, surrendering to the wave of hopeless despair that suddenly rolled over her again. It wasn't the immediate problem, but all the rest, everything that went to make up the sum total of her present wretchedness, that was crushing her down, changing her into the abject creature she was fast becoming. In this last fortnight all her remaining courage seemed to have gone. If only she could give up the struggle, get away from this city that was a prison, from the constant friction, the fettering restrictions that every day grew more unbearable. If there was only some way out, other than the coward's way, some place where she could find peace, be free of the watching eyes that followed her everywhere she went, that watched even while she slept.

Revolt surged afresh in Isma's heart as she thought of that watcher, the giant Negro who acted as her special guard. For the man himself, a twin brother of Lakadha and already devoted to her, she had no feeling of dislike; it was the system, the sense of degradation that had come with the understanding of what he represented, that she found so intolerable; and his perpetual surveillance was, of all the limitations imposed on her, the one she loathed most and could least accustom herself to. Always in attendance, without his knowledge she seemed able to do nothing and go nowhere. And every night, on a mat on the landing, he lay across the outer door of her rooms—a tangible reminder of her lost liberty, a guardian who was also a spy.

Many times she had tried to evade his unceasing vigilance, to slip unnoticed from the palace, as she thought she had done today; but he always knew, was always waiting somewhere near at hand when the time came to return—as without doubt he was waiting for her now in the courtyard of the mosque, she reflected angrily. But

what was the sense in being angry with Sahadana? It wasn't his fault. A slave, like every other Negro here, where the rule of France did not extend, he only acted under orders, only did what he was told. And, no freer than he, she too was a slave, to do what she was told, to obey the commands of the man whose property she was, and would always be; for he would never loosen the tie that bound them; his love was too jealous, his desire too strong for him to let her go now. And, though she had been driven to it, her marriage had cut her off from help from the outside world. Not even to Hoyt, if or when he came again, could she appeal, supposing she were ever allowed to see him. But she would not be allowed. Said would never risk a rupture with the Sagamore, and his coming would mean her complete immurement for the time he remained in the city. If he made inquiries, remembering what she herself had told him, when he had spoken to her of David, he would probably be satisfied with any explanation given him—would probably think what everyone else must think.

Again Isma brushed away the tears which today seemed beyond control, and for a few moments longer sat very still, listening for the sunset call of the muezzin that would bring her respite to an end.

When, before the call came, she heard behind her the noisy creak of the small door that gave access to the platform, she did not even trouble to turn her head, so sure was she that it could only be Sahadana who would come here this evening to break in upon her solitude.

"There is time yet," she said in Arabic. "Go back to the courtyard, and wait until I come." Then suddenly she stiffened, for the low spoken "Have I not waited long enough already?" that reached her was not voiced in Sahadana's rough guttural tones; and, with a smothered gasp, the little color that had been in her face drained completely from it, she stumbled to her feet to meet the half quizzical, half bitter smile of the husband she had thought was still many miles away.

One glance showed her that he had only just arrived,

had come in search of her without even waiting to remove the stains of travel, also that he must have traveled far and fast; for, dust-covered and weary-looking, his appearance gave every indication of strain and hard riding. But the hunger in his tired eyes was more apparent than ever before, and under their devouring stare her own fell swiftly.

"I didn't know—it was you," she stammered. "I didn't think you would be back—so soon," and sat down again hastily, not only because her knees were shaking. Yet the embrace from which she was inwardly shrinking did not follow, and, glancing covertly at him, she saw that his hands were occupied with the heavy dark burnoose he was slipping over his head.

"If this is all the care you take of yourself when I am away," he returned, wrapping it round her in spite of her protests, "I wish I had come sooner. It isn't summer any longer, and it is foolish to take risks in this climate at this time of year. If your health is of no importance to you, kindly remember that it is of the utmost importance to me, and don't come up here in the evening again without something warm to put on when the sun goes down." He spoke gravely, almost anxiously, and the deep tenderness in his voice sent a strange feeling through her that amazed her. Was it just the contrast to Messaouda's indifference, she wondered, just gratitude that anyone should trouble about her again? But it was more than that. Though she had dreaded his return, though she was shaking now with fear at his nearness, she realized all at once that his coming had brought her a sudden sense of security she had not known for weeks. Paradoxical and incomprehensible it seemed to her, yet it was a fact; but a fact that did not make speech any easier, and it was with difficulty she forced herself to ask if there had been any trouble during his tour of inspection.

"None," he answered briefly; and, sitting down on the edge of the stone parapet opposite to her, he lit a cigarette and for some time continued to smoke in silence and study what little he could see of the face she kept persist-

ently turned from him.

"Haven't you been sleeping well lately?" he said at last, so suddenly that she jumped.

For a second only, her eyes met his, then she turned her head away again, thinking rapidly. If he had really come straight up here, he could know nothing of what had occurred during his absence. But had he? Or had he seen Messaouda first, and was he now, in true Arab fashion, merely trying to make her tell him what he knew already?

Uncertain what he might have learned, what distorted version might have been given him of the senseless quarrel that was none of her making, a sudden impulse came to her to blurt out the real history of these last two miserable weeks. But she couldn't do that, she reflected. She had never spoken to him of Messaouda's intolerable treatment since she had been his wife, and she was not going to speak of it now. There was trouble enough without making more, and she wasn't an Arab woman to go whining to the master of the house because another of his family made her life a burden to her. Hoping it might put an end to his questions she prevaricated:

"I get fever every night," she said, and wished immediately she had thought of some other excuse, for bending forward, he caught her wrist in his slim brown fingers.

"You are not feverish now," was his quiet comment. Flushing, she muttered, what was at least half the truth, that her head ached.

"If you shut yourself up all day you must expect headaches," he replied as he released her hand. "You don't take enough exercise. They tell me you haven't ridden once in the two weeks I've been away."

They tell me. The unaccountable softening she had begun to feel toward him passed as quickly as it had risen. Was that his first care each time he came back—to collect the reports of his spies and make a full investigation of all her actions during his absence, she asked herself scornfully, and her voice was sullen with resentment when she answered:

"Do you think I find it amusing to ride when I'm not

allowed to go beyond the plain, and even there have Sahadana trailing me to see that I don't disobey your orders?"

The complaint was no new one; and, annoyed that she should have chosen this evening, when he had hoped to avoid any clash, to reopen a discussion that was already worn threadbare, Said flicked the ash from his cigarette with a gesture of impatience.

"I've told you a dozen times why you cannot ride beyond the plain," he said curtly.

"Well, at least, spare me Sahadana," she persisted. "I'm not used to being spied on, and he gets on my nerves."

"You are not a woman of the people," he reminded her. "You are my wife, and it is our custom—"

"Your custom," she interrupted with a hard little laugh. "You break plenty of your own customs yourself when it happens to suit you."

"Perhaps," he replied, smiling in spite of himself; "but this custom I will not break."

She knew from his tone it was useless to prolong the argument. To push it any further might only rouse him to anger she dared not risk, particularly now when she was counting on him to help her with Messaouda. For she was counting on him.

Wonderingly she admitted it. And wonder grew as she realized that the new feeling of security he had seemed to bring with him, when he came a few minutes ago, had returned to her, stronger even than it had been before. As before, it was absolutely beyond her understanding. She only knew that in spite of what he had done, in spite of what he might still do, his mere presence had dispelled the vague terrors that had seemed to threaten her during his absence. And when he went back to the border? Could she, craven as she had become, face those indefinite terrors again alone? The worst he could do was known to her. What others might do was a medley of dreadful imaginings her brain could conceive but not control.

Her hands clenched as she nerved herself to utter what had suddenly flashed into her mind. While she still hesitated, the call of the muezzin came from the minaret

above their heads, and, flinging the end of his cigarette over the parapet, Said rose to his feet.

Afraid to speak, yet more afraid that he would go before she could say what she was trying to say, impulsively she clutched at his arm.

"Oh, wait," she gasped. But more would not come, and it was Said who at last broke the silence.

"My dear," he said gently, "I've been riding since the dawn. I want a bath, and I want some food. If you have anything to say to me, you must tell me later."

Later she knew would mean never, for already her courage was failing. And imploringly, wildly almost, the words she had not been able to voice before burst out:

"Don't leave me here alone again. Take me with you when you go back to the border."

For a moment he stood staring at her, too dumfounded to speak. Was it possible, he wondered, that she did not know the real reason of his frequent absences, that it was only in the ceaseless activity he imposed on himself, the physical exhaustion it produced, that he found the strength of mind still to leave her free? And to see her always, to have her near him night and day—would he have the strength then?

"It's impossible," he said brusquely, "absolutely impossible."

Once already this evening she had heard the same note in his voice, but this time fear of more than his displeasure made her reckless.

"Please, Said, *please,*" she entreated. But again he shook his head.

"It's impossible," he repeated. "You don't know what you are asking. I told you just now that everything was quiet, that there was no trouble this last trip. But do you think it is going to remain quiet? You know as well as I do that any day they may be over the border again—and I daren't let you run the risk. And apart from the danger of it, it would be too rough, too exhausting for you. If you went with me you couldn't have the comforts or the foods you are accustomed to, or even what you had

when you came down here with Al. You would have to live as the men and I live, eat what we eat, and sleep in a burnoose by the side of your mehari every night."

"I don't care what I eat or how I sleep," she cried, "only take me with you, for I can't bear it here any longer. If I have to go on living like this I'll go mad;" and, bowing her head on her knees she burst into almost hysterical sobs.

Rarely did she let him see her weep, and tonight the sight of her tears, the pitiful sounds that were, each one, like a knife thrust through his heart, was more than he could endure. Torn with indecision, weakened by the thought that she should want to be with him—even though he knew it was not love that was prompting her—he began to pace up and down the narrow platform, his mind in a ferment. What in the name of Allah had happened while he was away to make her ask this of him? That he would have to find out later. Sufficient for the moment that she had asked—and was it really so impossible, the danger as great as he had represented? Not if he took the precautions he would take. She had more to fear from him than from any raider. But if she chose to ignore the possible consequences of closer companionship, and she must have thought of it before speaking to him, why should he try to dissuade her? Why even struggle with himself any more? Some day, willing or unwilling, she would have to give what he had never yet taken; and, if this was to bring her to him the sooner, was he a fool that he should let the opportunity go? And was life so certain that he could afford to wait longer? Any time now word might come from Al, and then he would have to leave her—perhaps forever.

The longing he had striven for months to crush surged suddenly in a raging torrent, and the blood was racing like fire through his veins as he halted beside her again.

"I don't know what your reasons are for this insane idea," he said abruptly, "and I can't stop to listen to them now; but if you wish it so much, if you are willing to risk —whatever risks there may be, I will take you with me the next time I go."

"You will—you promise?" She was on her feet, staring at him in passionate eagerness yet with doubt still lingering in her tear-wet eyes.

"I have said it," he answered haughtily; "there is no need to promise." But it was only a flash of irritability that was gone in an instant and the next moment he smiled. "Well, haven't you anything to say in return?"

She knew words were not all he wanted, and shivered as he came a step nearer.

"I'm grateful," she faltered, "very, very grateful."

"Grateful!" With a soft little laugh of disdain he swept her into his arms. "Thank me properly," he said peremptorily.

Because she must, obediently she raised her head; but the cold passionless lips that touched his, after only a second's hesitation, were like ice to the fever burning within him, and with another smothered curse he let her go.

Yet even the embrace she hated could not destroy the strange easement of mind his coming had brought, and during the short walk home she found herself wishing that she had yielded to the impulse to confide in him, at least spoken of the Sheik, when she had had the chance. But the opportunity had gone, for the crowds gathered to greet him in each narrow street made conversation of any kind between them impossible, and when they reached the courtyard of the palace he left her hurriedly at the foot of her own stairway with no more than a curt intimation that he had told Sahadana to bring his food to her room "in about an hour."

Wondering a little, for it was the first time he had ever given her warning of any intended visit, she went slowly up the stairs, pausing once or twice to lean against the dusty wall while she struggled with the unaccustomed faintness that kept coming over her.

In the inner room Fatima was waiting to help her dress; but, in no mood to listen to the girl's excited chatter of the lover who was among the patrol that had just returned, Isma sent her away. Alone, too weary at first to move, she stood for some time with her thoughts gone

very far from her present surroundings until a metallic crash outside on the landing, which she knew was Sahadana setting down the big brass dinner tray, roused her to shuddering remembrance of where and what she was.

With the outer door closed, there was no fear of Sahadana intruding; but a closed door made no difference to Said. He came when he chose, and it might be any moment, for his hour, like every Arab's, was sometimes two hours and sometimes ten minutes. Which would it be tonight, she asked herself, and the recollection of other occasions when he had come unexpectedly brought a hot flush to her cheeks and quickened her tired steps as she went into the tiny adjoining dressing-room to strip off her riding clothes, bathe, and slip into the simple evening frock Fatima had left in readiness.

But often she had to stop and rest; and, back in the big room, too sick and giddy to stand any longer, with a little groan she dropped onto the low divan and laid her throbbing head against the cushions. The tom-tom was beating worse than ever, and her hands and feet were like stones. Was this the beginning of some illness, she wondered, or was it just nerves, just cowardice that was making her feel so lifeless and queer? Whichever it was, it didn't seem to matter. She was too miserably tired to care—and what did anything matter now?

She had been asleep for nearly two hours when she woke with a start at the sound of Said's voice in the anteroom. The short rest had brought her no relief; and, aching in every limb, her head still heavy and confused, she had barely time to collect herself before he came through the curtains followed by Sahadana bringing the long-delayed dinner. How late it was she had no means of knowing, but she guessed it was later than he had meant, and the thought that it might have been Messaouda who had kept him made her glance nervously at his face as she moved to make place for him on the divan. More inscrutable even than usual, tonight, it seemed devoid of all expression. Nor was his manner any more helpful. Apparently in one of his silent moods, he sat down without making

any remark, and during the meal which she scarcely touched he said nothing, though his eyes rarely left her for longer than an instant.

Yet for once Isma was wholly oblivious of their steady searching stare. Feeling sicker and giddier every moment, she could only wonder how long she would be able to hold up, and wish that the room would stop turning round and round. Even the old Sheik, waiting for her in his own distant wing of the palace, was forgotten, and dinner was nearly over before she remembered him again. But to speak of him, to incur deliberately the difficult explanations that would inevitably follow, seemed impossible while Sahadana remained in the room; and when the burly Negro finally removed himself, after bringing the mint tea without which no meal was complete, it was something other than the thought of those difficult explanations that still kept her silent. For once more they were alone, and the dread that always came then was driving everything else from her mind.

They were alone—and he was her husband. He was her husband—and they were alone.

Over and over, with dry lips, soundlessly she kept repeating it.

They were alone—and for what other reason would he have returned days before he was expected? No message from the city had recalled him. It was only to be with her the sooner that he had ridden like a hurricane, moving even his hardy tribesmen to wonder—so Fatima had said—during that punishing race home.

To be with her the sooner.

She could feel him watching her now, his eyes burning into her as she sat rigid with apprehension while the long moments dragged slowly by. And when, after what seemed hours, she heard him move, felt the touch of his hand on hers, it was almost more than she could do to keep from screaming; and, like a drowning man at a straw, she clutched at the only means of escape that occurred to her.

"The Sidi," she burst out breathlessly, "he wants me.

I ought to have gone hours ago."

Swiftly he stooped to her, reaching for her other hand.

"Not tonight," he said softly; "not when I am here."

Misunderstanding, seeing nothing of the tender anxiety of his face, with a choking cry she leaped to her feet.

"He *does,* he *does* want me," she cried. But as she spoke the floor seemed to heave under her feet; darkness like a cloud fell over the room, and everything went from her.

When consciousness returned, she was lying in his arms on the divan, shaking with the same hysterical sobs that had racked her earlier in the evening, yet with all fear of him suddenly gone as she yielded in her weakness to the strange comfort of the gentle strength that alone seemed to be keeping her from slipping back into the black void that had engulfed her before. In the numbed confusion of her brain, only one thought rose clear and distinct, a thought that clamored for expression; and, too dazed still to realize what she was saying, between the tearing sobs that made her voice almost inaudible she told him what she had never meant to tell.

"It's childish to say I've got the evil eye," she wailed, "and he knows I wouldn't hurt him. But Messaouda said—"

With a stifled exclamation, Said caught her closer, stilling her trembling lips.

"Forget it," he muttered. "Oh, heart of my heart, forget it. There isn't a soul here believes that; not a man or woman of them all, but me, who hasn't known for weeks how good you've been to him, and Messaouda—" The seething rage he had hidden for the last hour boiled over as he uttered his sister's name, and a terrible oath broke from him. "Did you think I knew she was troubling you?" he cried passionately. "Do you think I wouldn't have stopped it long ago if I had known? But you needn't be afraid she will ever trouble you in any way again. While she lives she's not likely to forget what I said to her before I came to you just now."

But darkness was stealing over her once more and her blank look told him that if she even heard them at all his

words were nothing to her but empty, meaningless sounds. And until her sobs ceased, until at length her shuddering little body lay still, he knelt motionless beside the divan, holding her in silence, all the bitter torment of his soul in his somber eyes as he stared yearningly at the small pale face he knew he dared not kiss if he was to leave her again tonight.

Chapter Nine: AS ALLAH WILLS

IN A LITTLE VALLEY hidden away in a fold of the hills on the Moroccan border, Isma lay wrapped in a burnoose at the foot of a bush-topped sand mound, wondering, while she luxuriated in the rest she had been looking forward to for hours, which bone in her tired body ached the most. The dawn had scarcely broken when she had mounted her mehari that morning, and now behind the hills the sun was sinking, sullen and angry-looking, into a low bank of dark threatening cloud.

It had been a long day, the hardest she had ever experienced, and thinking of it her mind went back to some of the marches she had made with the Sagamore. There had been occasions then when it had seemed as if the limit of her endurance had been reached, but those marches had been as nothing compared with the ones she had had to make lately.

That she could do and endure what she did now was due, she knew, to the man at whose side she rode every day, and from whose nearness she no longer shrank.

Though thought of the time when his forbearance would end was still agony, all other fear of him had gone that night, nearly three months before, when she had sobbed herself to sleep in his arms. And during the illness that had followed, and through which he had nursed her himself, hindered rather than helped by a terrified Fatima, his tenderness and devotion had made it impossible for her to hate him any more.

Too ill at first to know one face from another, it was not until several days had passed that she gradually be-

came aware of his constant presence, and then it had been merely to wonder apathetically why it seemed so natural to see him there. But as her mind grew clearer and she began to realize her changed feeling toward him, the knowledge of it only increased her unhappiness, and there were times when, borne down by the overwhelming longing that never left her, she almost wished she could hate him again. Yet throughout that period of intimate association he had never given her cause; and, in her utter dependence on him, there were other times when recognition of his care and considerateness swelled so strongly that she almost wished it lay in her power to repay his devotion and, from captive, become his willing wife.

Then, shuddering, she would turn her face into the pillow and weep despairingly because she was his wife.

When she was able, he had taken her from the city, and, in the keen healing air of the desert, she had soon grown strong and well again.

Accustomed to have Messaouda ride with them, the men had shown no surprise the morning Isma had first appeared, in the Arab dress Said had insisted she must wear, at the head of the patrol. Rather had they taken it as a compliment to themselves, and very shortly they had grown as attached to her as ever Hoyt's men had been.

Since then, with one brief return to the city for fresh meharis and supplies, she had lived and slept in the open, hungry and tired often, but free at last of the nervous terrors she was now ashamed to remember, and in greater peace of mind than she had known since her marriage. For, keeping the same firm hold over himself that he had during her illness, refraining even from the slightest caress, lest he should reawaken the fear she seemed to have forgotten, Said had made their close companionship not only tolerable but easier for her than she had ever imagined could be possible. Yet, with all his efforts at concealment, there were moments when he was off his guard, when the look on his face told her what his self-restraint was costing him; and each time she would wonder, as she had wondered so often, why he still spared her, if it was

in the hope that she might some time turn to him that he still left her free.

But he never spoke of the future, never referred in any way to the tie that bound them; and, as the weeks passed, with every succeeding day bringing some fresh proof of his thoughtfulness and care, as she learned to know and understand him more and more, little by little, in the consciousness of her new-found womanhood, it had come to her that, had there been no David Arne, she might have loved him, Arab though he was.

But she had no love left to give.

Day and night, waking and sleeping, only one thought lived in her heart, and as she lay now staring up at the clear evening sky, where a single star glimmered faintly against the blue, it was not of the man she might have loved but of the man she did love that she was thinking. David, whose life she had wrecked because she had been a coward!

The pale star at which she was looking grew misty and blurred, and for a moment in its place, through the tears that dimmed her sight, it seemed to her that she could almost see the face and tall muscular figure she saw so often in her dreams—always booted and mud splashed as if he too spent his days in the saddle, and with always in his eyes the same gloomy questioning look that had been in them when he stood on the platform of the London station waving her good-by.

Was it only her own longing that brought those torturing dreams, she wondered, only her own longing that so often brought that strange feeling that he was somewhere very near to her? Or was it perhaps just thought transference, his mind reaching out toward her mind, that made him seem so close? But did he still think of her? Did he still watch and wait for the news she would never be able to send, still love her in spite of the long months of silence and the doubt that must have come to him? Ought she even to wish it, when it could mean nothing for him but a lifetime of sorrow and loneliness?

Again the scalding tears rose in her eyes, and again,

furtively, she brushed them away. Only at night, when the darkness hid them, could she indulge in the relief of tears. She mustn't give way to them now, mustn't let Said see she was crying.

Fearing he might have seen already, for so little ever seemed to escape him, she shot a stealthy glance at him where he sat beside the dull embers of a small fire; but his attention appeared to be fixed on the revolver he was cleaning, and, with a quick sigh of relief, she moved nearer to the mound and sat up to take stock of the surroundings that she had been too tired to look at before.

Used though she was to them now, she always found some new interest in these nightly camps; and, from Said and the three or four earnest talkers squatting near him, her gaze wandered to the bunch of kneeling meharis fastidiously picking at their ration of grain; then, from them to the rest of the men, some, a very few, drawn a little apart and engaged in the ritual of their evening prayer, the remainder, like the majority of the ben Aissa, less punctilious in their religious observances, busy with the rifles they kept in such spotless condition.

Yet so far Isma had never seen those rifles used. Only once during the many weeks she had ridden with the patrol had they come in contact with any raiders, and that a night skirmish, a mile or so beyond the spot where she lay sleeping, and of which she had known nothing until the following morning.

For the time being peace seemed to reign on the border, and tomorrow, unless Said changed his mind at the last moment, they were to turn their faces homeward again.

What would come then?

Her teeth bit deep into her lip, and with a feeling of suffocation she tore the thick folds of the *chesh* from around her throat and shook the big turban from her head.

Then a heavy sigh came from her. It wasn't any good thinking of it. It was only what she had to expect, the final price she must pay for her own appalling folly; and, hard as it was to remember sometimes, her folly might

have brought worse suffering, a far more horrible fate. Though Said had forced her to marry him, at least it was love—a love as deep and enduring perhaps even as David's—and not mere lust that had driven him; and whatever the future held for her, whatever her life with him was to be, she would have the knowledge of his love, the certainty of his protection to help her on her difficult way. She would not be the toy of a moment, flung aside and discarded for some new fancy, forced to unspeakable depths of humiliation and shame, as she would if he had been like Ishak. And, if this return to the city brought an end to her freedom, she would always have the remembrance of these past months when, for love's sake, he had left her free.

Slowly her eyes turned to him again, and this time, as if he had been watching for them, he looked up, thrust the revolver into the breast of his *gandoura,* spoke to one of the men who was bending over a cooking-pot on the fire and, rising, came leisurely toward the mound.

"Mami sends salaams and apologies. There's a djinn in the fire, and dinner will be late," he announced, with the flicker of a smile, as he hitched his burnoose forward and slipping off his shoes, squatted at her booted feet.

The trials of Mami the cook were a standing jest in camp, and glad of anything that took her mind from herself Isma gave a little laugh.

"Another one?" she exclaimed. "That's because he forgot to say his prayers again. I warned him the last time, and he needn't think I didn't see. I wasn't asleep. We shan't get any food at all if he goes on neglecting his devotions like this. He's getting slacker every day, and the rest of them are nearly all as bad. There were only five tonight who remembered. But it's the same with all your people, Said. I can't think how a saint like your father ever came to have such a godless tribe."

"Or such a godless son?"

Her smile faded, and she looked at him thoughtfully.

"I wasn't being personal," she said at last. "I was only thinking of the men. It's not quite the same with you. I

suppose you got out of the way of it when you were in America. Everything must have been so different and difficult for you there. I used to wonder so much," she went on after another little pause, "before you told me your—your plans, why your father ever sent you and Messaouda to America. And even now, when I know the reason, I still wonder how he ever brought himself to let you go so far away. You were all he had, and it must have been a big wrench for him."

Said bent forward to shield the wind from the cigarette he was lighting.

"Not so big a wrench as it will be for him to die without seeing the hope of his life accomplished," he muttered as he flicked the burned match into the bushes; and there was something in his voice that made Isma glance quickly at the prostrate figure of the messenger from the city who had led an exhausted mehari into the camp scarcely half an hour ago.

"Did Siliman bring bad news? Is the Sidi worse?" she asked, mentally reproaching herself that she had not thought to ask sooner.

"Messaouda seems to think so," he replied, his tone hardening a little as it always did now when he spoke of his sister. "She says he is weaker, and she asks me to get back as soon as possible. I've had a feeling for some time that we were wanted, and it's lucky we are as near home as we are. We can do it in three days—without pushing you too hard." But the last words came doubtfully and for a moment he sat silent, scowling at the ground between them. Then, with sudden remorseful vehemence: "You've been pushed hard enough as it is," he burst out. "I've been a brute to you all this last week."

Determined not to be the subject of conversation if she could avoid it Isma shook her head vigorously.

"Oh, no, you haven't," she said lightly. "And don't take all my poor little pride away from me, don't make me think I've been a failure after all. I thought I was doing wonders. It was only today—it seemed a bit long. But I'm all right now, and I'll be fit for anything in the morning.

Did Messaouda say if any word had come from Mr. Hoyt?" she added, hoping to turn the trend of his thoughts.

Gloom settled over Said's face again. "No," he said slowly, "and I'm getting just a little bit—worried."

Never before had she heard him admit as much, and it was his tone rather than the actual words that made her realize now that, in spite of the unconcern he had shown hitherto, Hoyt's prolonged absence was as great an anxiety to him as it was to Messaouda.

"You don't think anything has—happened to him, do you?" she said uneasily; for, with all her loathing of the work he was engaged in, she could never have any other feeling than affection for the kindly Sagamore.

"I don't know what to think," he said at length. And suddenly, perhaps because she herself had given him the opening, he broke through the reserve he had maintained ever since the day he first told her of the schemes he knew she viewed with horror.

"I can't understand what is keeping him so long over the other side—if he is there still—and I can't understand why we hear so little from Ishak. What he's doing with himself, Allah only knows, though I might make a pretty good guess where he spends most of his time. Algiers isn't the place for him. There are too many—other attractions. I was against his going from the first, and there are one or two others I could have sent instead who would have jumped at it if they had been asked. But Ishak pressed me to let him have the job, and Al thought it would be all right, so I gave in. I wish I hadn't now," he muttered lower, and more to himself than her.

"Do you trust Ishak, Said?"

"Trust him—why not? Why shouldn't I trust him?" he said sharply.

For an instant she hesitated. Then, with a rush, for the knowledge of it had weighed on her often, more heavily these last few months, she told him of her meeting with his cousin in the city the morning before Hoyt left them. But as he listened the frown gradually left Said's face, and when she finished her story, which did not include

any mention of her fright in the haunted square, to her surprise and somewhat to her annoyance, for she could find no cause for amusement in it herself, he only laughed.

"If that's all you've got against him, I don't think there's any need to worry," he said with a shrug. "He's a perfect right to come and go as he pleases, you know. He probably forgot something and came back to fetch it. Anyhow he didn't delay the caravan; he was with them when Al joined up."

Isma gave a little incredulous sniff.

"If he only came back for something he forgot, why was he so anxious not to be recognized? Why was he skulking about the streets in disguise?"

Through the fast-gathering gloom, Said peered at her for a second, and then looked away, the corners of his mouth twitching.

"There are times when Ishak prefers not to be recognized," he remarked dryly, "but that's his affair, not mine. I never interfere in his private concerns unless I'm absolutely obliged."

"But suppose it wasn't—a private concern that brought him back?" Isma persisted, her face flushing, for she knew enough of Ishak to guess what had been implied. "Suppose it was something—quite different? He hates Mr. Hoyt, and he's hateful enough himself to do anything to—"

"Not anything that would jeopardize our plans, for I suppose that's what you mean," Said interrupted with quiet assurance. "He may hate Al, though I didn't know you knew it, and there's never been any love lost between him and me, but I can't doubt his loyalty to the ben Aissa or any of our friends. If he hates Al and me, he hates the French worse, and he's up to the hilt in this business, as deep in as I am—and with a lot less to lose," he added, with a smothered sigh and a swift glance that the growing darkness hid from her. But she heard the sigh and impulsively her hands went out to him.

"Give it up, Said," she cried. "Give it up, now, before it's too late."

Quivering under her touch, his teeth clenched to keep back the words that were rising to his lips, very gently he unclasped her clinging fingers from his arm.

"That isn't possible, my dear," he said quietly. "It's gone too far. I couldn't stop it now—even if I wanted to."

Useless though she knew it was to argue with him, the vivid mind pictures that flashed into Isma's imaginative brain brought another sharp cry of protest from her.

"But it can't succeed. Oh, Said, you *know* it can't!"

Muttering something she could not catch he rose abruptly to his feet.

"The only thing I know with any certainty, and that matters just now, is that you are hungry," he retorted with a light laugh; "and, if Mami can't settle his differences with that djinn of his, I suppose I shall have to do it myself—if you're to get any supper tonight." And swinging on his heel he went back to the fire.

The hint he had given was too direct for her to attempt any further remonstrance, or even refer to the matter again, and when he returned a little later—followed by an apologetic Mami bearing the steaming couscous that had been her staple food for weeks, and by one of the other men, who lit another small fire of brushwood to give them light to eat by—the few sentences they exchanged during the meal, for they were both too hungry to talk much, dealt principally with incidents of the day's march and the possibility of a storm breaking before the morning.

With this last thought in his mind, Said paid more than ordinary attention to the erection of the wind screen of saddle blankets that was her nightly shelter; and when, a few minutes after she had swallowed her last tiny glass of boiling mint tea, she announced her intention of turning in, he went himself to fetch an additional burnoose to wrap around her, in case the weather should change.

Both fires had died down, and in her little enclosure Isma could see only the stars overhead and the red glow of Said's cigarette, which came to her through a rent in the blanket that separated them. For, contrary to his usu-

al custom, he had not gone back to his men for a last talk over the embers, and, for long after their murmuring voices had sunk into silence, he continued to sit smoking cigarette after cigarette, as sleepless apparently as she was.

It was not often now that she lay awake for any length of time. Fatigue and the strong air, combined, generally brought sleep very shortly after she laid her head on the saddle bag that served as a pillow. But tonight sleep would not come, and hours, or what appeared to be hours, passed while she still lay wide-eyed and wakeful, listening to the deep silence that was only broken at intervals by the scrape of a match when Said lit a fresh cigarette. At last even that faint interruption to the stillness ceased, and she heard him lie down and, in a few moments, with a feeling of envy, heard the soft regular breathing which seemed to indicate that he at least had found relief from thought.

Noiselessly, lest she should disturb him, she rolled over to stare once more at the blazing stars. As she did so she fancied she heard the far-off hoot of an owl. But though she listened for some time the sound was not repeated, nor did any other night bird seem to be abroad.

Grown used to sleeping in the open, ordinarily she never gave a thought to the possible dangers that might be lurking near them in the dark hours, but tonight for the first time she found her mind dwelling on things she had never troubled to think of before, and as time went on, and sleep seemed as far off as ever, little by little she became conscious of a feeling of uneasiness, a sensation of indefinite dread that again and again made her hold her breath and strain her ears till they ached, listening for something that never came.

Angry with herself for what she thought was just nerves, she tried not to listen, tried not to think. Yet try as she would the feeling persisted, growing momentarily stronger until at length it was almost more than she could do not to wake the sleeping man beside her. Once she was very near to it, but her pride revolted at confessing fears she knew he would only laugh at. So, moving closer to the blanket, slipping one hand under its frayed edge so that

she could rouse him if need be, she pulled the big hood of her burnoose farther over her head and made another determined effort to sleep.

Whether she really slept, or whether it was just drowsiness she had surrendered to, unknowingly, that left the blank in her mind, she never knew; but it seemed only the next minute when a shrill cry, which rang out almost at her ear, and then other deeper exclamations, together with a confused sound of struggling near her, made her leap up with thumping heart and quick hands tearing at the blanket screen.

Already the camp was in an uproar, shouting men running from all directions, but Isma had eyes and ears for nothing but what was happening actually at her very feet.

Where Said had lain alone, now in the imperfect light there appeared to be three figures lying twined in an inextricable heap, figures that heaved and strained as they grappled fiercely with each other on the ground. That one of them—and at the moment he was undermost—was her husband, she knew by his dark burnoose; but as she sprang forward strong arms caught and held her. A torch flared at the same instant, and, by the light of it, she saw Said twist himself free of the other writhing bodies, caught the gleam of steel in his upraised hand, the flash of the knife blade as it descended, heard another shrill choking cry that was followed by a grunt of satisfaction from the stolid tribesman who was holding her, and shrank back with her hands over her eyes, fighting against nausea.

When she forced herself to look again, her gaze fell first on a still shape covered with a burnoose that lay at a little distance; and, turning from it with a shudder, she went to where Said, in the midst of an interested, murmuring group, was bending over another suggestively still figure, whose contorted features, as she drew nearer, she recognized as those of one of their own men who had been on guard that night.

At her touch Said looked up quickly, to nod reassurance to her murmured inquiry.

"I'm all right," he said with a short laugh. "It was

Yusef who got what was coming to me. No, he isn't dead," he went on in answer to a second whispered question, "only nearly throttled. He'll be round in a minute or two."

Isma's glance strayed to the still form no one seemed to be heeding and then returned to the unconscious Yusef.

"But what was it? How did he come?"

"I don't quite know, myself, yet," he replied. "We'll have to wait until Yusef can tell us. All I know is I was awake and heard something moving at the back of the bush. I thought it was one of the men, and rolled over to see what was wanted. He jumped at me before I could clear my feet, but I managed to get his knife just as Yusef landed on top of us. After that—well, it was rather like a football scrimmage," he added with another little laugh. Then, jerking his head toward the mound: "You'd better go and lie down again. I'll come and tell you later what Yusef has to say."

She was glad enough to go, for she knew there was nothing she could do, and her knees were shaking with reaction; and, huddled under her coverings once more, she lay with her back turned to the dead man, wishing fervently that he could be put out of sight, and even more fervently that it had not been Said who had killed him in that horrible way. And he had thought nothing of it, had laughed while he told her, with the blood he had shed still wet on his fingers! That was the Arab in him, the callous disregard for life and suffering that was part of his natural heritage, the inborn instinct no western education could stifle.

For a moment something of the old fear rushed back into her heart to send her cowering closer to the ground, shivering at the thought that those crimson-stained hands were her husband's. Then in quick revulsion of feeling she reminded herself that he had acted only in self-defense. It had been his life or his assailant's, and what he had done he had had to do. But if only she had not seen him do it!

Clear in every detail she saw again the scene she knew

she would never forget as long as she lived—the writhing body pinned under his knee, his upraised arm, the swift fall of the knife as he drove it home; and another shudder shook her.

Yet when he came she forgot all the shrinking horror that had filled her only a few minutes before, and it was nothing but deep and real relief that it was not he who lay out there stiff and cold under the stars that she felt as he dropped down beside her. Eagerly she turned to him.

"Was Yusef able to tell you anything?"

But her question went unanswered. Without seeming to hear it, with a sharp intake of the breath that was almost a groan, he groped for her hands and, for the first time since her illness, crushed them to his lips, covering them with passionate kisses.

"If he had come the other side—your side," he whispered unsteadily, and she could feel him shaking from head to foot with the emotion which, kept hidden from his men, had risen beyond control now that they were alone, "If he had got *you—God,* I've been thinking of it ever since!"

It was a possibility that had not occurred to her, and for a moment the thought of it kept her silent. Then she laughed, a rather tremulous little laugh.

"Well, he didn't—and if he had, I expect you—you'd have got there first," she said with confidence that brought his lips to her hands in another long burning kiss. But he made no comment, and when he spoke again his voice had recovered its usual calmness.

"Yusef hadn't much to say. He was lying in the shadow of a drinn bush, waiting for his relief—and thinking more of that than of his duty, I'll swear, though he swears he wasn't—when he saw something crawling between him and the camp. At first, from the shape, he thought it was a hyena, and it set him wondering for there aren't any hyenas just about here. Then he saw that it was a man with a knife in his teeth, and started to crawl after him. He was afraid to shoot, didn't know how many others there might be and thought a shot might spoil our chances of getting them if there were any more. His gun hampered

him, and, as he was losing ground, he left it in the end. He told me he aimed to get up with the fellow before he reached the mound, and then deal with him quietly, so you needn't know anything about it; but he hadn't a knife to throw, and he couldn't lessen the distance between them—he was some yards behind—so in desperation he yelled to warn us. He's sitting over there now, cursing Mami for borrowing his knife without telling him—he thought he'd lost it when he found it was gone—but he can only croak yet, and Mami and the others are cursing him considerably louder for bungling the job and letting you be disturbed."

Isma gave another little shaky laugh.

"They're dears," she said chokily; "but who was he, Said? A Moroccan?"

"No," Said answered slowly, "and it's the only part of it that puzzles me. They know I'm on the border, and all along I've been expecting something of this kind, but the man who came tonight was a Tunisian. And what brings a Tunisian here, and what he could have against me, beats me altogether. He'd have told me before he died if I hadn't had to kill him so quickly." But the last was only a thought, checked before it reached utterance, and the cruel look that flamed in his eyes was gone when he turned to her again.

"I want a word with the guards before I settle in. You're not nervous? You don't mind being left for a little, do you?"

"But it isn't safe—*Said, it isn't safe!*"

Already on his feet the sharp cry brought him back to her in a quick stride.

"You're perfectly safe," he said gently; "the men are all close to you. There isn't the least—"

Almost petulantly Isma shook his hand from her shoulder.

"I didn't mean that," she broke in indignantly. "I wasn't thinking of myself."

His heart gave a sudden wild leap, and for an instant he hung irresolute, staring down at the dim outline of

her lying at his feet. Then, sneering at himself for a misunderstanding fool, with a quiet "It will be dawn in a few hours. Try and get some sleep," he dragged his eyes from her and slipped soundlessly away.

But not until he returned, nearly an hour later, not until she heard again the regular even breathing that had deceived her once already tonight, did she settle down to follow his example.

Yet the morning light revealed no signs of weariness on her small sunburned face, and she felt nothing of the fatigue of the previous evening when, her slight breakfast eaten, she went in search of the luckless Yusef—who was still in disgrace with his mates—and from him, after a few words of cheer, to superintend the feeding of her mehari.

Unusually sweet-tempered, the big riding camel let her handle him freely, and she was coaxing him with dates out of her own pocket when Said joined her. She heard his step but for a moment did not look round and, free for that moment to gaze as he would, hungrily his eyes ranged over the slender, graceful figure that so closely resembled his own. The clothes she was wearing were his and, except for his few extra inches and the greater breadth of his shoulders, seen standing or riding together, there was little, at a casual glance, to distinguish the one from the other. In the darkness of night even the men had sometimes mistaken them, and it was of the mistake that might have been made last night that he was thinking as he stood watching her now. And, angry with himself that he had ever listened to her entreaties to accompany him to this dangerous locality, angry with the guard whose negligence had exposed her to such risk, there was no answering smile on his face when she turned with a laugh and outstretched empty hands.

"Have you any dates, Said? He's eaten all mine."

It was their first meeting since the happenings of the night, for he had risen before she woke; and bitter remembrance of the hope with which for one brief moment he had deluded himself, the seeming indifference she displayed now to everything but the great beast she was

fondling, brought a rush of sudden unreasoning irritation that stirred his smoldering wrath to a blaze.

"Not for that greedy brute," he returned shortly. "He's had enough already, and more attention from you than is good for him. You're demoralizing him, as completely and thoroughly as you are demoralizing the men. It's true —you needn't look at me like that," he went on as he caught her startled glance; "your word's getting to have more weight than mine with this patrol. This morning, for instance. What's the use of me having Yusef up for neglecting his duty—he ought to have seen the fellow long before he did—if you go and sympathize with him the next minute? Since you spoke to him he seems to think he's done something clever—instead of being the damned fool he is. He won't feel so clever when I've finished with him," he added, with a snarl that took all the remaining color from her face.

"But you're not in earnest," she faltered, "you don't mean what you said—about the men? You can't mean it, for it isn't true. You know it isn't true. You know I've never done anything to—to question your authority. And Yusef —you don't mean that either, do you? You're not really going to—punish him?" Her voice sank to a shaky whisper, for she had learned something in these past months of Arab punishments, but with an effort she controlled it. "Said, please—say you didn't mean it."

The bitterness he had given way to still rankling, he had listened with averted head, his scowling glance roving over the quiet camp, anywhere but in her direction. But now, as he turned slowly, as he saw the mingled horror and reproach in her troubled look, all his angry irritation, all the strange incomprehensible desire that had come to him to hurt her, and which had hurt him far more, fell from him, and in swift self-hatred and remorse he caught her hands up to his lips and kissed them—not with the passion of the previous night but humbly and reverently as one of his men might have done.

"No. I didn't mean a word of it," he muttered; "and for God's sake, don't think of it again."

"And Yusef?" There was no fear in her eyes now, only pleading that was more than he could resist. Yet the clemency she asked was against his principles, and his answer was slow in coming.

"It's a bad precedent," he said at last, reluctantly, "but if it will make you any happier"—he looked away, his lips tightening—"if it will make you happier, I suppose I'll have to let him off," he added with a shrug and a rather forced little laugh. And, swinging abruptly away from her, he shouted an order that sent the forty men of the troop scrambling to their feet hurriedly, buckling on cartridge belts and gathering up camp gear and camel saddles. In ten minutes they were on their way.

There was no trace this morning of the storm clouds that had hung so menacingly in the north the evening before; and with the gloom gone from her husband's face, with the feeling of constraint that had kept them both silent for the first hour forgotten, Isma found her own spirits rising in proportion as the sun lifted gradually to soften the outline of the stark hills and bring warmth that was unusual for the time of year.

For once, as she had tried so often and had as often failed to do, she was living for the moment, surrendering without other thought to the strange charm of the wild, stern country through which they were passing, and responding eagerly to Said's almost uninterrupted flow of speech.

Never since their marriage had she found it so easy to respond, so easy to meet his glance. For the common peril of the night, the emotion he had shown when he came to her, that had made her realize even more fully what she was to him, seemed to have brought them nearer to each other than ever before. And, as if he were trying to efface the memory of his temper in the morning, never had Said been more self-restrained and considerate, more careful not to offend.

In one way in particular was his thought for her made specially evident, though it was some time before she discovered that she was the cause of a circumstance that had puzzled her ever since their early start. The previous night,

speaking of Messaouda's letter, he had warned her that his father's condition necessitated as speedy a return as possible to the city; and, with the knowledge she had of him now, she knew from his very silence on the subject that he was more anxious than he cared to show; yet, in spite of the fact that the ground was easier than some they had traversed lately, the pace at which they were riding today was slower than it had been for many days. At first she put it down to extra caution, following the episode of the night, and, not given to questioning his actions or asking for explanations, she refrained from any comment. But as the morning wore on without incident or the sight of any living soul, she grew more and more puzzled. It was only at midday, when he drew rein in a small rock-hung ravine and dismounted with a brief announcement to the men that there would be a couple of hours halt, that she learned the real reason of their slow progress and the unexpected rest that was so acceptable.

Yet not until their light lunch was finished, and he still vouchsafed no explanation, did curiosity overcome her usual scruple sufficiently for her to voice what had already risen once or twice to her lips and as often been suppressed. Wriggling into a more comfortable position against the big boulder that screened them from the men, she turned to look at him where he lay close beside her, stretched at full length with his hands clasped under his head and the inevitable cigarette between his teeth; and, after a moment's hesitation, broke a silence that had lasted for several minutes.

"You said yesterday we'd have to push on quickly, because of your father," she began rather diffidently; "but we simply crawled this morning. And now—if you're in a hurry, why this perfectly heavenly rest?"

Said tossed his cigarette at a scurrying lizard.

"I've a wife to consider as well as a father."

The quietly uttered reminder brought the color flaming into her cheeks, her face closer to her updrawn knees.

"Yes—but—but I'm all right," she jerked out. "You needn't go slow on my account."

With a little grunt of dissent he sat up, feeling in the breast of his *gandoura* for another cigarette.

"Needn't I?" he said slowly. "I'm not so sure. I don't want all the good you've got from these last weeks undone. You're well now, and I'm going to keep you well—Inshallah."

"But the Sidi?"

"Do you think he matters most? Haven't you learned yet that you're more to me than anyone else in the wide world? You're not fit to ride as I've made you ride lately. And after last night—the Sidi will have to wait. Not even he comes before you. And he won't misunderstand— when he knows what's kept us. He would have done the same himself." He paused, glancing at her from under his long, dark lashes. Then, with an odd little laugh: "There isn't much resemblance between us, but in one thing at least we have been alike, my father and I. He too loved only one woman, had only one wife, and when she died he put no other in her place. And so it was with his father before him, and so it has been all down the line, as far as I can gather. One wife—and faithful to that one. For Arabs"—he laughed again softly—"we've been a singularly temperate race, and, in consequence, time and again the succession has hung on a single life—as it does now," he added, with another quick sidelong glance. But the loosened folds of her white linen *chesh* hid her face from him, and after a moment's silence he bent forward and picked up a stone from the ground. "I'm dead with sleep," he said abruptly. "If you're not going to sleep yourself, wake me when the sun gets past that rock." Flinging the stone at another boulder, lying at a little distance, he stretched out again, and, rolling over on his face, buried his head in his arms.

But the sleepiness he professed was only a pretext, and more than once, still sitting with her chin sunk on her knees, Isma heard him move restlessly, more than once heard the whisper of a long-drawn sigh—and knew beyond any shadow of question of what he was thinking.

A single life—and in the background Ishak, waiting and hoping, with envious eyes fixed avidly on the inheritance

he coveted, that would be his—unless—

Her head sank lower, sank until nothing of her face could be seen, while unnoticed the sun crept nearer to the rock he had indicated.

Yet if that had been his thought, there was no sign of trouble in his face when, twenty minutes later, he roused her with a laughing "Nice watch you've kept. Why didn't you tell me you were sleepy?"

"I wasn't—I haven't been asleep," she stammered, without looking at him, and not seeing the hand he held out to help her she jumped to her feet. But in her haste she tripped, and stumbling, fell headlong into his arms.

For a moment he held her closely, his strong nervous body shaking as it had shaken the night before. Then, unable to trust himself any longer, he put her from him, forcing a smile as he drew back a step.

"That's the second time. There's bound to be a third."

Tears were nearer at that moment than mirth, but the reference to her first precipitated tumble into his embrace made her laugh in spite of herself.

"But that wasn't my fault," she objected; "it was that beast Horace. You don't know what a fool I felt. I was covered with shame and confusion."

His dark brows shot up with affected surprise.

"Were you?" he said dryly. "My recollection is that you laughed, and rather unkindly, considering you'd just knocked all the wind out of me."

"Meaning I weigh a ton?" she said, pouting.

"Meaning anything you like—so long as it's my arms you fall into," he replied, and with another little laugh he motioned toward the waiting men.

More than once as she rode beside him during the early part of the afternoon, Isma wondered what they would find when they got to the city, what difference, if any, the old Sheik's death would make to the plans that had been his life's work, and to those who would be left to carry out what to her was an appalling trust. But she kept her wonder to herself, for the matter concerned her too nearly; also she had no wish to remind Said of the anxiety he

seemed temporarily to have forgotten. And not only anxiety for his father. Since the march had been resumed, he had apparently thrown all care to the winds and, jesting with the men, laughing and talking with her, years seemed to drop from him, the grave lines of his face to become almost boyish.

She had seen that youthful look sometimes before their marriage, but never since, and never so marked as it was this afternoon; and, as if it was a reflection of his thoughts, he fell at last to talking of his boyhood, of the carefree days before he was sent to America to learn what was to fit him for the part he was destined to play in the affairs of his country.

From English, which they usually spoke together, unconsciously he had dropped into Arabic, and the childish escapade he was relating was drawing appreciative chuckles from Mami, one of the few elderly men in the troop, who was riding close beside them.

"There's no doubt about it," he concluded with a grin, reverting once more to English; "I must have been a charming child. Ask Mami. I put a knife into him when I was five." But as Isma turned to him again, after inspecting the faint scar on the lean sinewy arm Mami had bared with an even broader grin, his smile faded and he sighed.

"I was a happy little devil in those days. And now--Allah, how long ago it seems!"

She knew he was scarcely thirty, and a little smile came as she looked from his smooth, handsome face to his slender muscular body, swinging so easily to the stride of the tall mehari.

"It wasn't so very long ago. You needn't talk as if you were a hundred," she laughed; and to check the cloud she saw gathering in his eyes she lured him on to further reminiscences.

The brilliant promise of the morning had held during the afternoon, and the slanting rays of the sun still fell with almost the warmth of summer on their backs as they rode side by side an hour later. It was a bare expanse of country they were passing over, a level, gravelly plateau

without even a bush to break the uniform monotony, and secure in the clear view that stretched for miles on either side, gradually from the head of the troop they had fallen back until they were some three or four hundred yards behind the others.

His store of reminiscences exhausted, Said had fallen silent again; and, tired with the unusual heat, and from the loss of sleep the night before, Isma had begun to droop, leaning more and more heavily against the high cross peak of her saddle.

Watching her anxiously, glancing forward from time to time, Said at last drew his mehari nearer to hers.

"It won't be long now," he said encouragingly. "We'll soon be off this plateau. That's the Bab-el-Hetub ahead of us, and there's a valley where we can camp about three miles farther on."

"The Gate of the Wood," Isma repeated wonderingly, sitting up straighter to peer at the broken mass of rock that seemed to have suddenly sprung up from the ground, and which the men had nearly reached. "Why is it called that? I don't see any trees."

"There may have been some, hundreds of years ago," he replied, "but not within the memory of man. It's just a name that has clung. No, don't hurry him," he added as she raised her whip. "We'll let the men get past the rock first. It's full of pit holes and hiding places, and I can't have you running any more risks."

"But it's so near home. Surely you don't think—"

"I don't," he said quickly, "but it's best to be on the safe side." And, with a peremptory injunction to keep close behind him, he rode on in front of her.

She realized the significance of his action, knew he was deliberately screening her with his own body should the need for it arise, but in spite of the experience of the previous night she was in no mind to take his precaution seriously. And when, a few minutes later, he called to her that the men were clear of the rock, she turned a laughing face when she ranged alongside of him again.

"I told you it was too near home," she scoffed. "You're

getting fussy, Said."

But he only smiled, and with another little light laugh she gave her attention to the curiously weathered pile they were approaching. Turreted like some old ruined castle, it seemed the work of men's hands rather than nature's, and when they drew abreast of it she checked her mehari to examine it closer.

For a moment, his eyes on the men ahead, Said did not miss her. Then, aware suddenly that she was not following, he looked back, shouting to her to come on.

Waving her whip in response, she touched her mehari lightly on the flank; but, as the great beast leaped forward simultaneously from the rocks above there came a crackle of rifle shots, and, without a sound, he dropped like a stone.

Flung clean over his head, Isma landed on the hard ground with a force that left her momentarily dazed; and, with the odd feeling of detachment, with no sense of personal peril, she lay where she had fallen, listening uncomprehendingly to the vicious *spat* of the bullets that were pattering around her like hail. It was the thud of another mehari dropping to his knees between her and her own dead mount, the sound of Said's voice and the fierce clasp of his arms that roused her a moment or two later to some understanding of what was happening.

Before she could collect herself sufficiently to speak, before she could even turn her face to his, he had tossed her into his saddle and leaped up behind her. Yet, dazed though she still was, it seemed to her that he had faltered for an instant when he leaped; and, as the well-trained mehari bounded to his feet, again she thought she felt Said lurch against her shoulder. With a sharp cry she tried to twist round, but his hands held her firmly, and his voice came low and imperative:

"Ride, for God's sake—and keep your head down."

Cold fear was knocking at her heart, but there was nothing to do but obey, and stooping lower she snatched at the guide rein lying loose on the mehari's neck.

Strung out one behind the other, in two long lines, the

men were returning, silent and grim-faced, riding as she had never seen them ride. In a few moments they were up with them and had passed, twenty to continue in the direction of the rock, and twenty to wheel and close round the racing mehari with its double burden. Still the pace did not slacken; and, swaying in the saddle, her breath coming in short hard gasps, with a sob of relief, Isma saw two shaggy camel heads draw level with the big mehari's and, close to her, one on either hand, the faces of Mami and Yusef. From them both, as they ranged alongside, came a muffled exclamation, and then silence that turned the fear in her heart to dreadful certainty.

Everything else seemed to fade into insignificance, and to what was happening behind them at the rock she gave no further thought. Firing there might have been, but as they raced on she could hear nothing but the swift pad of the camel's feet, see nothing but the slim brown hands gripping the saddle peak in front of her—and, dreading to question him, dreading to look around, she tried to take comfort just in the fact that those hands were still there.

Three miles, he had said, but to her it seemed like thirty before they reached the little sheltered valley where at last the troop drew rein.

Since that one imperative order, he had not spoken; but he was conscious, and until he saw Isma dismounted, he would let nothing be done for himself.

Both wounds were low down in the body, and blood was pouring from him when he was lifted from the crupper of the kneeling mehari. With the means and skill they had, the men did what they could, but from the first Isma saw by their grave looks that they knew it was hopeless. The wounded man knew it too, and very soon he told them to stop torturing him and leave him with his wife.

Until then, half sitting, half crouching on the ground, supporting him against her knees, she had forced herself to remain silent. But now, alone with him, she weakened, and the feeling that she was in a sense largely to blame for what had occurred grew too strong to be suppressed any longer.

"It's my fault, my fault," she burst out miserably. "If I hadn't been here, this wouldn't have happened. If you hadn't stopped for me, you'd have got clear. And now, now —oh, Said, Said, why didn't you leave me?"

Freed of its linen-swathed turban, his head was lying in the curve of her arm, and as she spoke he moved it in faint protest.

"Leave you?" he murmured with tender reproach. "How could I have left you? And you forget. By my faith all things are ordained, and this was written from the beginning. It was my moment. They would have got me even if you had not been here. *Marsallah.* It is the will of God—His answer to my prayers," he added, his lips twisting in a painful little smile. For a time he lay staring broodingly into space. Then all at once he shivered, and she felt the hand in hers tighten convulsively.

"It was a wonderful dream I dreamed," he said slowly, "the dream of a nation that would be born again, of a kingdom—with you to share it and be its pride. But you were right when you said it was madness. I can see that now—when it is too late. And unless Messaouda stops it—if she will stop it, for it was her dream even more than mine—instead of freedom I shall have brought destruction and slavery to my people. And while they live and their children live, while my memory remains, my name will be accursed among them."

"But it was for them, for *them* more than for yourself you did it," she cried, in almost angry expostulation, as she saw the sweat of anguish she knew was mental as well as physical gather on his forehead and roll in big drops down his face.

But he scarcely seemed to hear her, and when he spoke again it was in a dreamy tone that had in it a note of strange wonder:

"All my life I lived for them and thought only of them —and then you came, to change all the world for me. And now, as I lie here, they seem to be very far away, and it is you I am thinking of most—Isma." Again his voice trailed into silence, and again she saw the big drops of moisture

gather on his forehead, saw his teeth clench to keep back the groan he would not permit himself.

But the words that were on her lips never reached utterance, for at that moment the guard who had been left on the high ground came slithering in reckless haste down the hillside into the tiny valley with, at his heels, a bunch of strange camels, led by the fifteen survivors of the twenty men who had gone on to the rock.

The lump in Isma's throat swelled as she counted them, for she had grown fond of these wild, primitive tribesmen who had become so attached to her, and among the five who were missing there were two in particular whom, because they were always in attendance on Said, she had known even better than the rest. Now beyond the dark river they had already crossed, their spirits were waiting for the master they had served faithfully in life.

With an effort she forced back the flood of emotion that was rising almost beyond control, forced back the tears that were threatening to brim over, while she watched the men dismount.

At length from the group that had gathered round them one pushed his way out and came slowly forward. Apprehensively her glance returned to the still face lying on her arm. His eyes were closed, but as she bent over him they opened, looking up questioningly.

"It's the men—our men, Said," she said softly. "They've some camels with them, and Abdulla is coming to report."

The lines of pain round his mouth had deepened, but he managed to smile at her; and the smile was still on his lips when the headman came to drop on his knees with a strangled sob and kiss his bloodstained robes. For a moment he knelt, unable to speak. Then he raised his head, his fierce face wet and quivering.

"They thought to trap thee, lord," he muttered, "for that they let us pass. And that we might get farther, they waited for the *lalla,* knowing that thou wouldst return. So much I had from one before he died—and would to Allah the accursed dog had died slower," he added savagely.

From his follower, Said's look wandered to the bunch

of strange camels.

"How many—did they number?" he asked in a gasping whisper.

"Thirty and three, lord."

"Thou didst get them—all?"

"All, lord. Thinkest thou we would have come back had there been even one left to tell the tale?"

"And who—did not come back?"

With a catch in his voice, for his own son was among them, Abdulla gave the names, and then, at a sign from Isma, got to his feet, and covering his face with his burnoose, went heavily away to join his fellows.

After that for nearly half an hour Said lay without speaking, fighting against the deadly faintness that was steadily creeping over him, struggling to keep what little life was in him a little longer. And gradually, through sheer will power, strength returned to him, to say what he was determined to say before consciousness went forever.

"I couldn't give you up before," he whispered, and the words came slowly and with difficulty. "Though I knew you would never love me, I wasn't strong enough to let you go. And now—I ought not even dream of your forgiveness, or ask that you should ever think of me with anything but hatred and loathing; but I can't—leave you—without asking. Isma—even if you can't say it now, will you try, some time in the days to come, when you are back where you belong, when you are happy again, as I pray God you may be, will you try, if only for what I did not do, to forgive me for what I did? Will you try to forget the uncivilized Arab who thought only of his own longing, and remember me just as a man who loved you with all his soul and strength—who loved you so well that in the end he was glad to die that you might be free? Can you give me so much hope to take with me, beloved?"

The pleading in his voice, more desperate even than the pleading she had heard in it the night of their marriage, was more than she could bear. Carried beyond all remembrance of her own unhappiness, of even the man she loved, for the moment everything went from her but

just the thought of his suffering, and choking with overwhelming pity and regret, she caught the dark shapely head closer against her breast.

"You can't die, you mustn't die," she sobbed wildly. "Only live, and I'll be what you want, give you all you want—everything you ask me."

But, better than she, he understood the impulse that prompted her, and a half sad, half bitter smile flickered over his lips as he thought of the many nights when, lying beside her as near as he dared allow himself, passion-racked and torn with jealousy that had been almost beyond endurance, he had heard her, while she slept, crying in her dreams a name that was not his.

"You think so now," he said gently, "but if I lived, if I took you at your word, could you give me the thing I long for most? Because you have promised, you would keep your promise. That I know, and for even that I am grateful. But do you think the mere possession of you would satisfy me when it is your love I want above everything? When—if ever I asked it—you made your sacrifice, when you gave yourself to me, it would be only the husk of you I would hold in my arms, while your heart, beating against mine, but not for love of me—" A long quivering sigh came from him. Then, very low but with passionate distinctness, "It is better as it is. Better for you, and better perhaps for me, for my love is a love too jealous to be shared, and if I lived I could not endure that even your thoughts should turn to another."

In torment with the physical pain he still tried to hide from her, exhausted with the strain he had just put upon himself, the sweat was pouring down his face again. And, conscious that a very short time remained to him, before she could speak—if she could have spoken—he told her to call the men nearer.

But his strength was going fast, and it was little he could say when they came—an order concerning her safety should other raiders come before the relief patrol that had been sent for, and then a word of farewell to each man, summoned individually and by name, that brought broken

expressions of grief and emotion they did not even attempt to conceal. To all of them he was more than just their leader, and there was not one who would not rather have lain there in his stead, have given his own life gladly to save the beloved life that was ebbing away so swiftly.

Vaguely Isma was aware of it, as she was aware of their presence; but they were only shadows to her now, and of their feelings toward herself, whether in their hearts, as she did, they held her responsible for his death, and what their attitude would be when he was gone, she never once thought. Heartsick and spent with her own emotion, what might happen to her seemed of no moment at all, and she could think of nothing but the inert figure lying once more silent in her arms. Was he unconscious or only asleep, and would he pass quietly like that, she wondered; and, looking fearfully at his drawn, gray face, at his blood-drenched clothing—blood that had spread to stain her own hands crimson—earnestly she prayed that it might be so.

Only two hours ago—so full of life and strength. And now—A sob she could not check broke from her, and, roused by the sound of it, he stirred, murmuring her name. But her whispered answer soothed him, and again he seemed to sleep.

Drawn nearer to him, the men had ceased to talk among themselves; and a greater hush, too, had fallen over the quiet little valley—a hush which to Isma was pregnant with meaning. In the brooding silence it seemed to her that all nature, like the watchers beside him, was hanging breathless with suspense, listening, waiting. The faint breeze that, earlier, had chilled the air, was gone. Too tired, yet, to eat, the meharis lay clustered where they had dropped. Even the birds that a few moments before had been singing were still, cowering mutely among the *drinn* bushes, as though they also knew that, from far higher than their tiny wings could soar, Azrael, the angel of death, was swooping earthward on his dread errand—Azrael, of whom he had spoken so often when he told her the legends of his people, whose coming he had never seemed

to fear. But had he ever thought that the winged messenger would come for him so soon, before even he had reached his prime, and with all his hopes and dreams still unfulfilled?

Another sob rose in her throat, but she choked it back, afraid it might rouse him again to the pain she prayed he was mercifully unconscious of now. If she gave way, before the end, to the feelings that were suffocating her, what use would she be to him then if he needed her? To keep calm was the only thing she could do, the only help she could give him.

Over and over she kept repeating it. And while the hush deepened, bringing a sense of solemnity and awe that made this passing far more dreadful to her than her father's death had been, while the sun sank lower and lower, and the group of somber-faced men still stood silent and motionless, their gaze fixed on their dying chief, she sat rigid, not daring to move, scarcely daring to breathe, until her arms grew numb and her tired body ached with the strain of her cramped position.

How long that period of waiting lasted she never knew, for each minute that dragged by was like an eternity. Then, suddenly, as the sun dipped down below the hillside, a great shudder went through him, and his eyes, agonized and filled with terrible yearning, looked up into hers.

"Kiss me just once—willingly," he gasped; and as she stooped lower, tears streaming down her cheeks, "Allah's peace go with thee always, oh, my desire," he whispered in Arabic, and died with her lips on his.

Chapter Ten: "DO YOU WANT ME?"

IT WAS A TERRIBLE HOME-COMING, to a city of mourning that rang with cries and lamentations; to a grief-stricken Messaouda, who hugged her sorrow so jealously to herself that, for weeks, after one passionate outburst during the first moments they were alone together, she would not speak of the dead man to the girl whom she openly accused of

his death.

"It was you," she had cried fiercely, her marvelous eyes heavy with glistening tears, "you, and the unhappiness you brought him, that killed him. He never spoke of it, he tried to hide it—even from me. But do you think I don't know? Do you think I didn't see how he suffered? With all his soul he loved you, loved you so well that he made you his wife, gave you the highest place among us that he could give, when it was in his power to have kept you only as a plaything; and what did you give in return? Hatred that broke his heart, that drove him in despair to ride the border, when there was no need, when he had no right to risk his life, that was so necessary, so precious to everyone but you. And when you made him take you with him, to rob him of even the little peace he found there, was it for his sake you went—or in the hope of seeing him killed? Oh, you needn't deny it," she had flamed with an imperious gesture as Isma tried to speak, "I *know*—and do you think I will ever forget it, ever forgive you the sorrow you caused him, or forgive you for coming between us? Before he saw you, I was everything to him. Then you came—and turned him against me. And as if that was not enough, to make my misery complete, Allah willed that you, who rejoiced in his death, and not I, who would have given my life for his, should be with him when he died. Do you think I can ever forget or forgive that either? As long as I live I will never forgive you, and if I could make you suffer, if I could *kill* you for the suffering you brought him, I would. But I can't—I can't. Because he loved you, because his wishes are more to me still than my own, though his blood is on your hands, I cannot touch you. And the people—" Halting on the hard sob that had choked her, with bitter contempt she had flung out the words, "The people think you *cared.*"

And hadn't she cared? Isma had wondered as Messaouda swept past her with another glance of passionate scorn and hatred; and in her own rooms, where she had fled to escape from the noisy professional mourners, whose frenzied wailings had jarred on her so horribly, she had told

herself that she would always care. Not in the way the people thought, but with deep self-reproach for her own share in the tragedy of his short life, with feelings of everlasting indebtedness for the mercy he had shown, and with sorrowful pity that would make it easy for her to remember him only as, dying, he had begged he might be remembered.

Alone in the room she could scarcely yet realize he would never enter again, where everywhere she looked she saw the personal trifles he had kept there for his convenience still lying among her own belongings, memories had crowded in upon her, memories of the hours they had sat there together, when she had watched his every movement with shivering fear and horror; memories of the illness through which he had nursed her with a woman's tenderness, of the long days of convalescence that only his unfailing patience and kindness had made endurable. Hunger and weariness alike forgotten, for long after the room grew dark she had crouched on the side of the bed with her face buried in her hands, living over the months that were past, months she could have made so different, that might have left such very different memories. And, thinking and remembering, shuddering at the thought of what might have been before her now, had he not spared her, gratitude had filled her heart to overflowing again, and she had wept for him with tears that even Arne could not have grudged.

Nerve-racked with all she had gone through, and physically exhausted from the speedy ride back to the city—speed that had been maintained at her own insistence—she had crept into bed that night almost in a state of collapse. And for a week, seeing no one but Fatima and Sahadana, she had remained in her own rooms, trying to realize the change that Said's death would make for her, trying to keep herself from thinking of the freedom that even yet might never be hers, of the future that still seemed so dark and uncertain.

Whether, in spite of what she had said, there was anything to be feared from Messaouda or not, she neither

knew nor cared. Fear of Messaouda had gone forever. And, for the rest, she had Said's revolver, handed to her when he had given his orders for her safety before he died, and, with it, the will to use it on herself if need be. It was not the people—from both Fatima and Sahadana she had learned that their feelings toward her were unchanged—but Ishak she had in mind; Ishak, who would return as lord of life and death to the city that now, presumedly, was his; Ishak, over whom there would no longer be any restraint, whose love for one woman did not keep him from desiring many—and *she* had been one of the many.

The soft lines of Isma's small oval face had hardened to a look of stern resolve as she sat fingering the only gift she had ever accepted from the man who for nearly a year had been her husband.

But when at last she forced herself to leave the restful quiet of her own rooms, it was without the weapon that might some time be so necessary; for she knew it would be weeks before Ishak could even hear of what had happened, and as many more weeks before he could possibly reach the city.

The necessity for it seemed further off than ever when, later that morning, she heard, not from Messaouda, who was working with her secretary, but from the marabout whom she found sitting in the courtyard, that no messenger had yet been sent to Ishak with the news of his inheritance.

"What need, while *he* still lives?" the old priest had added, jerking a clawlike hand toward the wing of the palace where the chief of the ben Aissa, kept in merciful ignorance of his son's death, lay with only a spark of life flickering in him. But the jealous gleam that had flashed into the marabout's sunken eyes had faded as quickly, and with a heavy sigh he had begun to rock backward and forward again, muttering the prayers her question had interrupted.

In the quiet of her own rooms, asleep often in the daytime as well as at night, Isma had managed to a certain extent to hold her thoughts in check; but, brought into

immediate contact once more with the life she had tried for the last week to forget, thought had risen beyond control and, too agitated to keep still, all that morning and for the greater part of the afternoon she had walked up and down the courtyard, wrestling with the awful fear that she might never escape, never regain her liberty or reach England to beg for David's forgiveness, even if that was all he had left to give her. Hour after hour, with hurried, feverish steps, she had paced the tesselated pavement until, in very terror of her own thoughts, she had longed desperately for some occupation, no matter how trivial, that might help to keep her mind off herself.

And before the day was out occupation had been literally thrust upon her.

Absorbed in the final preparations for the great rising that was all she lived for now, and in which alone she found some slight relief from her sorrow, for the last week Messaouda had had no time or inclination to attend to mere domestic details, and, for lack of any definite control, chaos had begun to reign in the once well-organized household. With characteristic native eagerness to shift the burden of responsibility to any shoulders other than their own, from the mistress they dared not approach, the servants and Negro slaves turned in a body to the one they considered had an equal right to command; and Isma found herself not only besieged by a tearful staff, imploring orders, but confronted at the same time with a dozen or more disputes and petty quarrels to settle as best she could.

Uncongenial though the work was, she welcomed it thankfully; and, with the knowledge gained after a year spent in an Arab house, with the memory of the duties that had been forced on her before Said took her to the border, and of which he had known nothing, still fresh in her mind, her task was easier than it might have been. The servants' confidence in her gave her confidence in herself, strengthened the new feeling of assurance that made her indifferent now to Messaouda's opposition and hatred—indifference so complete that, later in the evening, after she had finished her solitary meal, prompted by the real

affection she had for the old man who had always been kind to her, she went without hesitation to his room to announce quietly to Messaouda that she was able and willing to take over the night nursing again.

For a moment, as they faced each other across the wasted figure lying on the bed, Isma had thought there was going to be a repetition of the ugly scene of months before, that had led to the breach between Said and his sister, and she had braced herself to meet the explosion that seemed imminent. But the anguish she saw mingled with the anger in Messaouda's haggard eyes had brought a rush of pity that softened the hard look that had come to her own face.

"You can't do everything," she had said gently; "you'll have a breakdown if you don't take more rest, and that won't help either you or your people. If you're afraid to leave me with your father, if you can't trust me alone with him, you can send Lakadha to see that I don't do him any harm, if you like. But for your own sake, for your people's sake, go and get some sleep."

For another moment Messaouda had stood staring at her, sullenly, antagonistically; then, with a smothered sob, she had gone swiftly and silently from the room. But Lakadha had not been sent; and, from that night on, Isma had watched through the dark hours alone, wondering each time she came if it would be the last, and marveling, with every succeeding dawn, at the dying man's tenacious hold on life, at the strength that still lay in his frail body.

In the fixed routine she had set herself, one day differed little from another; and, in their similarity, imperceptibly they slid into weeks, weeks that in their turn brought no change, and still no word from either Hoyt or Ishak.

Compelled of necessity to sleep in the mornings, she was seldom free to take any exercise until the late afternoon. Sometimes it was only to the streets she went, to talk with the people, who always gathered eagerly at her coming, who, she knew, in spite of their disappointed hopes, loved her for the sake of the dead man who had been their god. At other times, driven nearly mad by thought, the narrow streets seemed even more prisonlike than the palace; and,

with Sahadana pounding behind her, she would ride down the steep ramp away from the city and gallop the hill-encircled plain until the horses were white with foam. But it was to the little observation platform, so often her refuge before, that she went most often; and a sure refuge still from interruption and intrusion, it was on the old wooden bench beside the whitewashed parapet that she was sitting this afternoon, three months after Said's death, staring with dull hopelessness at the northern hills and wincing from time to time at the sounds of wailing that floated up from the streets below.

Since midnight, when the old Sheik's long struggle for life had ended suddenly, those harsh, discordant cries had rung in her ears, straining her already overstrained nerves until she could have shrieked with the torment of them; and as soon as she was able she had fled from the palace.

Broken utterly by this second sorrow, all Messaouda's pride and revengeful anger had fallen from her; and, in a complete revulsion of feeling that was as genuine as it was sudden, humbly and pathetically she had turned to Isma, rather than to her own people, for help and consolation. With compassion that was born of her own misery and loneliness, that made her able to forget how greatly Messaouda had contributed to that misery, Isma had done what she could, banishing the shrinking servants from the room, and staying with her for the remainder of the night and all through the following morning. Not until the late afternoon, when Messaouda had fallen asleep at last from sheer exhaustion, had she stolen away in search of the fresh air and quiet she herself was craving far more than sleep.

But the quiet she had sought had brought neither rest nor peace, for she could not tear her thoughts from something that Messaouda in her new confidence established between them had told her that morning, something that had gone far to kill the hope she had clung to all these last weeks. Yet it had not been altogether unexpected. She had had her own suspicions lately that there was more than the shadow of death hanging over the city where she had suf-

fered so much. Now she knew. But what was it?

What did it all mean, she wondered with an involuntary shudder. What else was coming to the ben Aissa and to her whose fate seemed bound up with theirs? What was the real reason of the silence that for the last three months had left them isolated and without news of the outside world? What were Hoyt and Ishak doing, and not only they but every other member of the widespread organization, that no answers came to the repeated messages that had been sent? Not even from Abdul Rahman, and he lived nearest, had there been any word. And of the messengers who had ridden with those letters, not one had ever returned. Man after man had vanished as completely as if the earth had swallowed them up, and with the need for all the men she had—for the Moroccans were out again in force—Messaouda had ceased for some weeks past to try to communicate with her associates.

Frantically she had wrung her hands while she admitted it, and with a fresh outburst of tears she had flung herself on the floor and buried her face in Isma's lap. Were their plans, the result of long years of thought and toil, to come to nothing after all—and now, when all they were waiting for was Al's return from America, she had wailed. Had he, who had never failed before, failed in this last and most important mission, and, by his failure, shaken the confidence of the others? What else could account for his silence and theirs? But why did he keep her in ignorance; why, when he must know how anxious she was, hadn't he come to report that failure and arrange some plan to retrieve it? His influence with the league had been second only to Said's; and now, when he was needed more urgently than ever before, where was he, where was he?

Ever since Messaouda uttered it, that question had been hammering in Isma's brain, was hammering still as she sat now staring at the northern hills with growing fear in her eyes; for, of all she had learned that morning, Hoyt's complete disappearance was the thing that touched her nearest. All her hope of returning to England, of ever seeing David again—hope that had risen afresh with Said's death

—had been pinned on him. Convinced that sooner or later his love for Messaouda would draw him back to the city, that he would help her when he knew her need, night and day she prayed for his coming. And now more than ever did her sole chance of escape seem to lie with him. In the extraordinary circumstances existing at present, only he could get her out of the country; only he could save her from Ishak. If he was here he could do it, would do it. But he was not here. And before he came, if he ever came, she might be dead.

It was not the fear of death, for she was not afraid to die, that brought the choking cry to her lips, but the thought of David, left forever without knowledge of the love that had come to her, without knowledge of the remorse and sorrow she had implored God on her knees she might be spared to tell him.

With outflung hands gripping the edge of the low parapet, with her head sunk on the hard stone, giving way at last to the despair she had been fighting for hours, she lay writhing in agony that was beyond tears. Only to see him, even for a moment, to feel the clasp of his arms, the touch of his lips on hers again! David—who had wanted her as she wanted him now; who would have waited, as he had promised, for the love that would have come; who, in this, as always, had known far better than she.

Why, oh, why had she been such a fool—such a selfish, pitiful fool? Why hadn't she trusted him, thought of him before herself, gone to him when he begged her? And it was so little he had asked, and for that little he would have given all he possessed in return, all a man could give who loved as he loved—just everything her heart was breaking for. Why hadn't she known, oh, God, why hadn't she known then what she was throwing away—what suffering she was to bring to them both? If he hated her now it was no more than she deserved, no more than she ought to expect.

Perhaps he did hate her—perhaps that was why he no longer came to her in her dreams, why, for weeks past, she had lost that strange, haunting sense of his nearness. It had

hurt—dear God, how it had hurt, torturing her with its impossibility. Yet, even when it hurt most, it had also helped, had seemed to lessen the distance between them, to bring them closer in spirit if in nothing else. Now, not even that shadowy comfort was left to her, and without it she was more alone than she had ever been. Utterly alone—

One hard sob burst from her, and then she lay still, striving to think only of him, to find fresh strength and courage in the mere utterance of his name. And over and over, while the evening shadows darkened, she whispered it! David, David. Oh, David, David!

Lost in her own grief, she had ceased to hear the wailing that still rose shrilly from every corner of the city. Even the muezzin's cry, close above her head, went unnoticed, and the last faint echo of the long sustained *Allah—illa—illa* had died away before she was aroused by the sound of Sahadana's rough guttural voice.

Mechanically she sat up, but it was a moment or two before she could collect herself sufficiently to take in what he was saying, to understand that Messaouda had sent for her. Then, when at last she did understand, the urgency in the burly Negro's tone sent her hurriedly to her feet, her heart pounding; but the question that nearly escaped her was not one she cared to ask Sahadana, and, with him stalking like a dark shadow at her heels, she took her way silently back to the palace.

It was a shadow she no longer tried to avoid, nor did the perpetual surveillance that had once been so intolerable trouble her now. Rather was she glad of it; for, deep down inside her, she had a feeling that some day she might owe more than just her life to Sahadana's devotion and watchfulness. And tonight, for the thought that had leaped to mind, she was more than ever thankful he was close at hand.

But among the crowd collected in the torch-lit courtyard, were only faces she trusted, and with a quick sigh of relief she ran up the steps to the room she had not entered for months.

There was no apparent change in it, except the portrait

of Hosein hanging uncovered, as she had seen it once before. The only change was in Messaouda, a change so startling that Isma's hurrying feet slowed almost to a standstill; for the calm-faced, resolute-looking woman who rose to meet her bore no resemblance to the distraught, exhausted girl she had left less than three hours ago; and instinctively she guessed that, even if it was not what she had feared, some other happening, perhaps equally momentous, had occurred during her absence.

"Has Mr. Hoyt come?" she blurted out breathlessly. But the hope she had caught at died again when Messaouda shook her head.

"No," she replied with a sad little smile. "I wish he had, for I never needed him more. It's trouble that's come, bad trouble on the border. One of the patrols has been cut up near—near the Bab-el-Hetub—" Her firm voice faltered as she named the locality that had already brought disaster on the ben Aissa, but with an effort she steadied it. "They were the usual number, forty, and picked men all of them; but the Moroccans were nearly three hundred strong, and it was just a—a massacre. Only two got away—Allah alone knows how, or how they managed to reach home. They are both hacked almost to pieces, and they couldn't tell me more than just the bare facts. If some of the shepherds hadn't found them and brought them in, they wouldn't have lived to give us any warning at all."

Except for that one falter, Messaouda had spoken calmly, almost callously, of the fate of her men; but the sob that broke from her, when she stopped speaking, showed how deep were the feelings she was endeavoring to hide; and with the horror of recollection in her own wide, dilated eyes, Isma caught her hand and held it tightly.

"Oh, my dear—how ghastly," she whispered. "But three hundred—three hundred raiders?"

Messaouda looked at her oddly for a moment, her lips tightening.

"It isn't a question of raiding any longer," she said slowly; "it's war. And now—of all times, when I need all the men I have here. And why now? That's what I want to

know most. What's behind it? Who's pushing them?"

Months ago Isma had heard Hoyt say the same thing, but the words that had conveyed nothing to her then had a grave significance now, and she found herself suddenly wondering if there was really anything behind it, if something more than age-old racial hatred was stirring the Moroccans to this new and determined activity. Or was it merely coincidence? Had the news of Said's death filtered across the border, and the Moroccans been spurred by the thought that they had only a woman to deal with?

But each succeeding question seemed as unanswerable as the last, and her mind turned quickly again to the more vital problem of the moment.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"Do?" Messaouda echoed, with a mirthless little laugh. "There's only one thing to do. Hit back quick—and hard, before they expect it. This is the first big move they've made for years, and I've got to crush it, if I have to call up the whole tribe. But that will take time, and time is everything to us now. Even a day's delay might make all the difference. So I'm sending five hundred to the border tonight."

Isma's lips pursed in a soundless whistle. Five hundred meant all the fighting men in the city.

"But that will leave you with no force here at all," she exclaimed.

Messaouda shrugged her shoulders.

"I know, but I can't help it," she replied. "My hand's forced, and I've got to risk it. And it will be only for a few days. I've sent for others to replace them. The orders went an hour ago," she added, pushing the heavy hair from her forehead with a tired sigh.

And, oddly, that simple statement of fact seemed to bring home to Isma the real exigency of the position, the burden thrust on Messaouda, more than anything that had gone before; and greater pity than she had yet felt filled her as she stood staring at the beautiful, sad face that was so strange and unnaturally calm.

"Why didn't you send for me sooner?" she said, almost

reproachfully. "Wasn't there anything I could do to help you?"

For the first time since Isma had entered the room, a rush of tears came to Messaouda's eyes.

"Haven't you done enough already to help me, who never helped you in your trouble?" she muttered unsteadily. "When I think of it, it just—"

"Oh, don't—please don't," Isma broke in hurriedly. "It's past and done with—I told you last night. You just didn't—understand, that's all. And perhaps it was my own fault you didn't understand. But I don't want to talk of it again, ever. It's not the past but the present we have to think of now. So tell me what I can do. There must have been something you wanted, or you wouldn't have sent for me," she added with a smile, determined that there should be no repetition, if she could help it, of the painful scene that had taken place between them the previous night, when all her efforts had failed to stem Messoauda's terrible self-abasement. Go through another scene of the kind she could not and would not; and, if Messaouda thought her hard, then she must just think it.

But Messaouda had no such thought. Brushing the tears from her eyes, she picked up the burnoose Isma had thrown off a few minutes before, and held it out to her.

"There is something you can do," she said quietly. "Will you ride down to the plain with me? The men want you."

"The men?" Isma repeated wonderingly.

Messaouda nodded.

"The men of—of your own patrol," she exclaimed, wincing, as she had winced when she spoke of the Bab-el-Hetub. "Abdulla is in command, and they always work with him. They are starting in a few minutes, and they want you to wish them Godspeed before they go."

With a lump in her throat that kept her from speaking, Isma followed Messaouda to the torch-lit courtyard, and through the surging, yelling crowd of townspeople, to the street where Lakadha and Sahadana stood waiting with the horses; and as they wound carefully down the long ramp, her eyes, that had been dry all day, were brimming

with tears. For she knew that as long as she lived she would never forget the gentleness and consideration of those fierce desert men after Said's death, and the care they had taken of her. And now, riding perhaps to their own death, it was for a last word with her and for her good wishes they were asking.

Drawn up in two long lines midway between the foot of the ramp and the shadowy blackness of the adjacent palm gardens, the five hundred meharists sat motionless on their tall mounts, ghostlike and silent in the brilliant moonlight, until Isma and Messaouda reached the plain and, wheeling their horses, started to ride slowly down the narrow lane left open between them. Then a ripple of movement ran through their serried ranks, and, swinging their rifles high, they burst into a wild roar of acclamation:

"Ya, Messaouda. Ya, Isma."

Again and again it came, splitting the deep stillness of the night and echoing weirdly from the rocks above; and, thrilling to the sound of her own name, conscious of the real affection that prompted those deafening shouts, Isma wondered how she could ever have thought silly and theatrical the homage that now touched her so profoundly.

Yet, of it all, it was the parting with Abdulla and the survivors of her own patrol that moved her most; and, as they pressed round her, kissing her hands and calling down Allah's blessings on her head, the tears stood thick in her eyes again, and her words of farewell were as husky and broken as theirs. For long after they were gone she sat silent on her restive horse, watching their swift passage across the moonlit plain until they were lost among the dark shadows of the encircling hills.

Messaouda, too, with thoughts of her own to keep her silent, had little to say during the ride back to the city; and, very shortly after the evening meal, she suggested that bed was the best place for both of them.

Tired out with the strain of the preceding twenty-four hours, Isma slept nearly the clock round, and it was late in the following afternoon before she woke to swallow the food Fatima had brought, scramble into her clothes, and

go in search of Messaouda.

A chill wind met her as she ran down the staircase, and, pausing in the courtyard to look upward, she saw that the sky, which last night had been so clear, was covered now with heavy black clouds. Moving sluggishly before the storm that was rolling up slowly from the north, they hung like a pall over the city, deepening the air of mystery which always seemed to envelop it, and increasing the gloom that already pervaded the empty streets. Never since she came to the country had she seen such a threatening or appalling-looking sky; and, wondering when the storm would break, wondering if the five hundred meharists had ridden beyond its reach or, if not, where it would catch them, she lingered for a time, watching the sullen drifting mass bank higher and higher, until a sudden sharp spatter of rain drove her to seek shelter.

The old marabout and a half dozen of the more prominent and influential elders of the city were descending the stairway from Messaouda's rooms when Isma came into the entry; and, for men who yesterday had displayed the utmost signs of sorrow and dejection, she thought they looked singularly smiling and pleased with themselves. Yet it was not a thought that caused her any great surprise; she was used by now to the mercurial temperament of the Arab; and, dismissing it and them from her mind, she hurried up the steps. But when she reached the inner room, the half smile that still lingered on her own lips vanished at the sight of Messaouda weeping bitterly before the portrait of Hosein. Drawing back to the curtains she had just parted, she was on the point of slipping away again when Messaouda turned and called to her.

"My dear, there's no need to apologize. I wanted you to sleep. I told Fatima not to wake you," she said, smiling through her tears, as Isma began rather incoherently to explain her late appearance. "And you couldn't have helped me with what I've had to do today. But I'm glad you've come now. I've something to tell you." She paused for a moment, her glance straying back to her husband's picture. Then, dropping on to the divan and drawing Isma

down beside her, "It's stupid of me to be upset like this," she went on, dashing the tears from her eyes impatiently. "It's not as if I hadn't thought of it before. I've been expecting it ever since Said was killed, ever since I knew that the hope we had when he married you was—was not to be." Checked by a heavy sigh, she paused again, and, without noticing the quick flush that flamed in Isma's sensitive face, she sat for some time staring at the little amulet she was turning and twisting between her fingers.

When at last she spoke her voice was curiously dispassionate, considering what she had to say.

"You must have passed Sidi Mahmud and the others on the stairs. They've been here for hours. They came to speak to me about Ishak—to tell me they refuse to accept him, that they will have no chief but me. I'm glad—of course, though it's only postponing the difficulty for a few years. If Hosein had lived, if my boy had lived, it would have been different. But there is no one to follow after me, or ever will be. I can't put anyone in Hosein's place—I told them just now when they urged it—and when I die it will be the end, the end of the house of ben Aissa. But you know what my people are—the future is with Allah, and it is only the present that concerns them. And Sidi Mahmud and the others have gone away happy, because, for the present, things are to be as they wish."

Sheer amazement kept Isma silent for a moment or two; for, though all her sympathies were with the decision that had been made, the calmly uttered announcement had filled her with overwhelming consternation. That the people should prefer Messaouda's rule to Ishak's was understandable, but that they should imagine he could be so easily disposed of left her gasping.

"I don't wonder they've revolted against Ishak," she said at length, with an involuntary shiver; "but what's he going to do about it? You can't possibly think he'll take this—lying down? And are you sure of all your people, Messaouda? Hasn't he any following among them at all?"

"There are a few jackals who run at his heels, for what they can get," Messaouda replied contemptuously; "but

most of them went with him to Algiers, and the few who remain won't trouble us—after tonight. It's no good, my dear," she said firmly as she met Isma's horrified look; "I can't afford to take any risks now. I know whom I'm dealing with, and it's just a necessary precaution that's forced on me. There is no room here any longer for any of Ishak's friends," she added, and the cold pitilessness of her tone sent another shiver rippling down Isma's spine.

"But he has friends elsewhere," she burst out, "and if they help him—"

Messaouda's eyes flashed.

"Let them help him; let him take his chieftainship if he can," she cried proudly. "It will only be when I am dead. The people have made their choice, and the City of Stones will stand in ruins before he sets foot in it again." With a confident little laugh, she turned to the low stool near her, to read through the bundle of papers the marabout had left for her signature.

Wishing that she could feel even a little of the same confidence, Isma scrambled to her feet and, going to one of the windows, stood looking out into the blackness, her mind in a ferment with the thoughts that came crowding one after the other in quick succession: Ishak—the luckless men who perhaps at that very moment were being hounded through the streets to their death—and at last, for it had to be faced, the increased seriousness of her own predicament.

What chance was there now of leaving the city? Already, for some unknown reason, cut off from all outside communication, it would soon, she was convinced, be in a state of seige; for Ishak was not the man to abandon lightly either the inheritance or the woman he coveted—and the way to the north would be more hopelessly blocked than it seemed to be at present. And was it a time to plunge the country into civil war, when war was imminent on the border? Why couldn't Messaouda have waited, at least until this trouble with the Moroccans was over? And how was a breach between two prominent members of the league going to affect the plans for the great rising? Had Mes-

saouda's self-satisfied advisors stopped to think of that, or were they banking on her extraordinary influence with her associates, banking, too, on the fact that behind Messaouda would assuredly be Hoyt, with his own far-reaching influence and his colossal fortune to turn the scale of public opinion in her favor? But where was Hoyt? It all came back to that, and she was no further on than when she had wrestled with the same question yesterday.

As she whispered it, the despair she had given way to then rushed over her again, swamping all other thoughts; and, deaf and blind to everything passing in the room behind her, she had to be called twice before she realized that the evening meal was waiting.

It was eaten in almost uninterrupted silence, for neither of the women was inclined to talk. And when at length the tray was removed, and Lakadha had come and gone for the last time, Messaouda returned immediately to the papers she had been busy with before.

Hour after hour slipped by, without a word being spoken, until Isma knew it must be past midnight. But her mind was too full for any thought of sleep; and, surrendering at last to a feeling of restlessness that had been growing on her for some time, she rose from her own corner of the divan and fell to pacing the room. She had taken only a few turns up and down when there was a heavy roll of thunder, and the storm that she had expected would break before this broke with a sudden and tremendous fury.

All her life she had loved thunderstorms, and, irresistibly drawn now to the window, she pressed close to the iron bars to watch the vivid flashes of jagged forked lightning, which, splitting the heavens in all directions and almost incessant, was throwing a lurid glare over the courtyard and the range of buildings opposite. The whole sky seemed a mass of flame; and, fascinated and absorbed, Isma craned nearer and nearer to the grille, forgetful of everything for the moment but the awful grandeur of the scene.

Undisturbed by the storm, Messaouda remained immersed in her work, until a particularly brilliant flash, that was followed by a more violent peal of thunder than

before, made her glance up with a smile.

"That was close," she exclaimed. "I wonder if it struck anything. Which way did it go?"

Rubbing dazzled eyes, Isma turned from the window and went back to the divan.

"I couldn't see," she laughed, "I—" Her voice broke in a startled exclamation, for above the heavy rolling of the thunder she thought she heard another sound, a sound that drove the color from her lips and held her rigid with apprehension while she strained her ears to listen. Quickly it came again, the sharp, unmistakable crack of rifle shots, and, with it, this time, from the courtyard, a wild clamor of savage yells and shouts.

In an instant Messaouda was on her feet, her face gone suddenly ashen; but, before she could speak, there was a rush of trampling feet on the staircase, a wilder, nearer yell; the curtains of the anteroom were torn back, and Lakadha, bleeding from a dozen wounds, staggered through the opening. Stumbling a couple of steps he stood swaying, muttering inarticulately. The next moment he was hurled aside and hidden from sight by the swarm of khaki-clad, red-fezzed Soudanese soldiers who poured in after him, to line up and fill the room until only a narrow passage was left clear to the door that gave on to the landing.

A single groan had burst from Messaouda at their entrance, and for a moment her slim shoulders had sagged as under a crushing blow. But now, with compressed lips, she stood proudly and defiantly erect, her right hand thrust in the silks that covered her heaving breast, her beautiful face set like a frozen mask. And, heartsick at the thought of what this must mean to her, Isma's fingers clenched tighter over her cold ones as, equally erect and still, she waited beside her, staring at the three figures walking slowly toward them.

To the salutes of Captain Dupont and the gray-haired major with him, she made no return. It was the central, Arab-clad figure that held all her attention, and seething rage filled her as she looked at the magnificent proportions

and handsome sneering face of the man whose coming she had so dreaded, and dreaded more now, though no longer for her own sake. In a flash she realized why and how he had come, and anger turned to even more bitter loathing and contempt.

Intermittent outbursts of firing still echoed from the courtyard and all about the palace, sounds that merely intensified the deep hush that hung over the room. So long and so horrible did the short moments of waiting seem, that it was almost a relief to Isma when, less than a dozen paces from them, the major motioned to his companions to halt and, saluting again punctiliously, made a step forward alone. But as he did so, Ishak, shaking off Dupont's detaining hand, moved swiftly to his side.

"Permit, monsieur, that I explain certain matters to my cousin first," he said suavely, in his villainous French.

For a moment the major hesitated, looking at him doubtfully; then with a shrug and a nod of acquiescence he drew back.

One quick glance Ishak threw at Isma before, gloatingly, exultingly, his flaming eyes fastened on Messaouda. That he had already in some way learned of his threatened deposition, that fierce desire was mingled now with hatred and a lust for revenge as fierce, was very evident, for it was exultant words that came pouring from him, pitiless words spoken as by a master to a slave, brutalities that turned Isma cold and sick, that eventually brought exclamations of protest and indignation even from the hardened Frenchman. But nothing he could say appeared to move Messaouda. Facing him unflinchingly, her proud head held high, she listened in disdainful silence while, with cruel frankness, he sketched the life that would be hers under his domination. And when at last, and then only at the major's angry insistence, he broke off with a final brutal taunt, two words were all she uttered.

With a sudden forceful movement that sent Isma reeling back against the divan, she leaned forward, her right hand flashing out from her breast with, in it, the revolver that had lain hidden there.

"Thou dog!" she cried, and shot him. And, as the big Arab fell dead at her feet, with a louder ringing cry of *"Hosein,"* she turned the weapon on herself.

The reports had come almost simultaneously; and, too late to prevent what they had never anticipated, the two officers leaped now to catch her as she fell. Yet it was Isma who reached her first, to lower her gently to the rug and then turn in a fury of passionate rage on the men whose aid she scorned.

"Don't touch her, don't dare to touch her," she muttered fiercely. "It's your doing, your fault as much as his." And gathering the slender lifeless body in her arms, she stumbled to the divan to lay it where she knew Messaouda would have wished to lie.

But as she knelt, trying with shaking fingers to wipe the blood from the gaping wound that disfigured the lovely peaceful face, a chance bullet from outside crashed through the window above her; there was a sound like the snapping of a piano wire, and, dislodged from its place, the heavily framed portrait of Hosein fell with stunning force on her head.

The storm had gone with the dawn, and bright sunlight was streaming into Isma's room when she woke from the deep sleep that had followed unconsciousness.

At first her mind was a complete blank, and, too drowsy still to open her eyes, she lay for some time wondering at the feeling of lassitude that made effort of any kind seem a sheer impossibility, and why her head ached so badly. Then suddenly she remembered—horrible detail after detail—and, shivering with nausea, she rolled over on to her side, burying her face in the pillow.

Messaouda was dead, and Ishak— Her fingers dug into the silken bed coverings, while shudder after shudder shook her. But gradually she regained control of herself, and, moving her head so that she could see the blank wall beside her, she tried to bring her confused recollections into order, to recall what had happened after she had laid Messaouda on the divan. She had been kneeling there, her hands and the front of her dress crimson with

the blood that welled from that dreadful wound, and then there had come—blackness. Now she was in her own room, with clean hands, and the stained dress replaced by the old silk kimono that was getting so threadbare. Who had brought her here and looked after her? Was anyone, perhaps Fatima, still in the room with her?

Slowly, noiselessly, she twisted round, raising her eyes to the window. For a moment the bright light blinded her. Then as her sight cleared, and she could see plainly, all the little strength she had seemed to desert her, and, almost suffocated with the wild beating in her heart, she stared and stared, praying passionately that she was sane and awake and not mad or dreaming—the dream that had come so often before. But in an instant she knew beyond any doubt that the tall, powerfully built figure standing in the deep embrasure, with his back turned to her, was no dream-man, no trick of fancy this time, to torture her with its impossibility. He was real, and he was here. How, seemed a matter of no importance at the moment. It was enough for her that he had come, that the prayers she had despaired of being answered were answered at last.

Coatless, the sleeves of his flannel shirt rolled above his elbows, his breeches and field boots still thick with dust and sand, he stood slightly bent forward peering down into the courtyard below—the solid embodiment of all her hope and longing. And, faint with the joy and thankfulness that overwhelmed her, she lay motionless, her eyes traveling wistfully over the long length of him, while she struggled with the word her trembling lips refused to form: "David."

Low though it was, when it came, the whisper reached him; and, turning from the window, he made a few steps toward her.

"Yes," he answered. Then, as she tried to sit up, "Lie still," he added quickly. "You had a nasty crack on the head last night, and you'd better keep quiet for a bit yet."

There was no more interest or concern in his grave look than a stranger might have shown, and the greeting which was so different from what she had expected, the total lack

of emotion in his cool, passionless voice brought a sudden chill to her heart and a feeling of desolation and loss that crushed her. For she had not been conscious to hear the French Army surgeon's warnings of the possible consequences of the blow on her head, following the strain and shock she had undergone; and she could not know that it was just fear for her that had driven all expression from Arne's face and kept him now standing stiffly at the foot of the bed, with the hands he could not trust thrust deep into his breeches pockets. Instead she leaped to the only conclusion his attitude seemed to suggest, and miserably she told herself that he didn't care any longer; that, whatever else it might be, it was not love that had brought him. Bitter tears brimmed in her eyes, and hastily she slid an arm across her face to hide them.

"How—why did you come?" she muttered dully.

"Don't bother about that now," was the quiet reply. "There will be plenty of time to tell you later. Sleep is the best thing for you at present."

His very reluctance to speak merely strengthened her conviction. His love was dead, killed by her own indifference, and he had come simply from some chivalrous sense of obligation, because there was no one else to bother what became of her, because Arnes and Crichtons had always held together—just the old family tradition. That was all, and all she deserved. And there was nothing left for her now but to keep him from ever knowing, to hide the pain that was almost driving her to his feet to sob out the love he did not want any more.

Forcing back the tears that were still welling, she sat up, bunching the pillows behind her, in spite of his protests.

"I don't want—to sleep," she said jerkily. "There's no need to fuss about a headache. I want to know—why you came. I want to know *now*."

That she could misunderstand, that she could doubt him in any way whatsoever, never occurred to him. His only thought, as he looked dubiously at her flushed face, at the deep blue, unnaturally bright eyes that never quite met his, was an anxious wonder whether agreement or

refusal was better for her in her present excited state. In the end he chose what seemed the lesser risk, and, moving nearer, he dropped down on the end of the bed with a little tired grunt.

"Kick me off if I'm in the way," he said with a smile, but it was a fleeting smile that passed quickly. And as he sat for a few moments, staring silently about the room, his eyes were somber with the torment of fierce hatred and jealousy that had been seething in him ever since he entered it.

A faint sigh, which he thought was impatience, checked his thoughts at last, and with all expression gone from his face again he plunged abruptly into speech.

"I got the letter you sent by Hoyt, and, as you told me there might be no opportunity to send another, I didn't expect one in a hurry. I knew you meant to stay here several months, and that you had an idea of going out to America again for the rest of the summer, before returning to England; so I took no news for good news—though I rather wondered you didn't cable from somewhere—and I didn't worry overmuch." A mental prayer that the lie might be forgiven him went with the words. "Then in the early autumn I got a letter from Dilkes, your lawyer, asking if I knew anything of your whereabouts, as he was getting uneasy himself, and the servants you left in the London house had got the wind up properly. I knew you wouldn't want flaming headlines in all the papers, so I wrote telling him to keep the servants' mouths shut, and not to do anything till he heard from me again. I wired to Hoyt in Algiers the same day, but I got no answer, so I wired to the British Consul, without mentioning you, and he wired back that the Hoyts' villa was closed.

"I sat down then and did some hard thinking. After what you said a year ago I didn't want to make myself a nuisance, but it seemed—well, a bit odd that you hadn't let Dilkes, at least, know where you were. In the end I decided to run over to Algiers and see if I could get any news of you there, while Dilkes got busy with the police in London. All my arrangements were made, and then I—I

had a rush of unexpected and rather heavy work that made it impossible for me to leave home for a time."

The break in his quiet even voice had been only momentary, and not until later did Isma learn what his anxiety for her would not let him tell her now, that it was his father's long illness and subsequent death that had kept him in England. And with no thought in her mind yet for anything or anyone but him, Isma never noticed the pause.

"I did what I could in the meantime," he went on in the same even tone. "I wrote to the Consul in Algiers, explained the whole matter, and asked him to tackle the French authorities. But they weren't helpful; said you had gone down into the desert at your own risk, and that there were reasons, which they wouldn't define, that prevented them from making an inquiry at the moment. In fact they seem to have snubbed the poor chap pretty considerably. I urged him to stick to it, but we couldn't get anything more out of them.

"Toward the end of January, Dilkes came to the Abbey for a consultation, at his wits' end to know what to do next, as the police and the detectives he'd engaged had failed utterly in their efforts to trace you. By an extraordinary chance, that same night, while we were at dinner, I got an unsigned telegram from Lisbon, saying you were still in the City of Stones and that there was trouble in the country."

"From Lisbon?" exclaimed Isma, roused at last to something beyond the torturing joy of looking at him and listening to his voice.

"From Lisbon," he repeated, "and, in view of what happened afterward, I can only think it must have come from Miss Hoyt. But I didn't care then who sent it. The information was all I wanted, and all Dilkes wanted. We got up to London in time for breakfast next morning, and then I went to the Foreign Office to pull all the strings I could. Fortunately they were big ones, and in a few days I was able to get away, with a mass of credentials and introductions that made things easy for me when I got to Algiers. And I didn't get there any too soon."

He paused for a moment, his gaze, which had been fixed on his dusty breeches, shifting to her flushed face.

"Do you know anything at all of what has been happening in this country lately?" he shot out.

The thought that she might be called as a witness to those happenings was horrible to Isma, and her eyes flickered under his steady stare.

"A little," she faltered, "but if the French authorities want me—"

"You needn't worry about them," Arne broke in reassuringly. "They know enough without troubling you for any information. They're out to make things as easy for you as possible, as easy as they've made them for me. As a matter of fact they've been extremely decent about it all, or I should never have managed to get down here. And I must say I take off my hat to them for the way they've handled this affair. The whole country might have been in a blaze, and now it's just—fizzled out, and the chiefs who were implicated, those of them who are left alive, won't trouble the government again. The French have known for some time that a revolt was brewing, and the knowledge of it was due to Dupont. It seems he's been suspicious of Hoyt for two or three years—"

"Where is Mr. Hoyt, David?"

At the sharp question, Arne looked up slowly from the breeches he was again absently contemplating, and before he spoke, his eyes told Isma what she feared. But it seemed to her ever since last night she had known, and though her lips quivered, her voice was steady when she murmured to him to go on.

Crossing one long leg over the other, Arne took up the thread of his story.

"When Dupont was convinced his suspicions were correct he reported to headquarters, but Hoyt had made such a position for himself in the country that Dupont only got laughed at for a fool, and a dressing down from his superiors that might have choked him off if he hadn't been so keen. He'd made up his mind there was something wrong about Hoyt, so he ignored instructions, and went quietly

to work on his own account. I got most of the details from him on our way down here. He hated the job, for he liked Hoyt personally, but he couldn't put personal liking before duty; and he seems to have hung on like a terrier to the few clues he managed to pick up. But they weren't many—Hoyt was too damn clever for him—and he'd come to a complete standstill when chance threw that fellow Ishak in his way.

"I don't know what led up to it; Dupont rather skated over that; but it appears Ishak had some grievance against —" For an instant Arne hesitated. Then, "—against the people of this place," he went on, his voice gone suddenly hard as steel, "and the upshot of it was he sold his cousins and the rest of his associates to the government, for his own immunity and the promise of the chieftainship of the ben Aissa.

"But that was afterward. At first only Dupont knew, and Dupont wasn't risking another snubbing until he had got his evidence complete. His Arabic is exceptionally good, and, dressed as a nomad, he followed you and Hoyt down here last year, and Ishak managed to smuggle him into the city somehow and hid him in some place or other that doesn't seem to be popular with the inhabitants."

"Then it was him I saw in the haunted square," Isma burst out. And Arne nodded.

"Yes, it was Dupont," he replied, "and he said you gave him one of the worst moments he's ever experienced, until he realized you'd taken him for a spook. When he got back to Algiers after that trip, he ripped in a report to headquarters that was a bombshell, and things began to hum. But Hoyt was in America and they wanted him back in the country before they moved: and, above all things, they wanted the business settled as quietly as possible and with as little expense as might be.

"Thanks to that swine Ishak, they knew the names of all the chiefs who were in the league, and not only did they flood the country with spies but, as the head and center of the rebellion, they drew a cordon round the ben Aissa, tightening it, little by little, until no one could get into the

territory, and everyone who left it was arrested as soon as he got over the border. The breakdown in the wireless here was engineered of course by Ishak, who had the operator in his pay.

"When I reached Algiers, Hoyt had been back a few weeks, and was preparing to start for this place with another caravan of guns and ammunition. The idea was to take him red-handed, so, when they got the date and his route from Ishak, a force was detailed to precede him a few days before he got away, the orders being to arrest him and then carry on down here. At the same time smaller detachments of troops were to be sent out over the country to rope in the remaining members of the league before they knew what was happening.

"I don't know how Hoyt came to be mixed up in this show, and I can't pretend to any sympathy with the part he took in it; it was a dirty game the way he played it, and he must have had some very strong motive, for it was totally unlike him; but I liked the old Sagamore, and I'd have given a lot to be able to pass him a hint of what was coming. But I couldn't, of course; and, if I'd wanted to, I shouldn't have had the chance. They never let me show my nose in the streets the whole month I was in Algiers. We got away, according to plan, and hung up, to wait for Hoyt's caravan, in the spot agreed on with Ishak, who was coming with him. The three days we put in there were the most loathsome I've ever spent. I hated the whole thing; it was so infernally cold-blooded. For Hoyt hadn't a chance. He hadn't a suspicion anything was wrong—and he just walked like a fly into a trap. They were hopelessly outnumbered and it was all over in about ten minutes.

"Hoyt knew the game was up, and he took it philosophically enough, even when he learned who had sold him. He simply turned his back on Ishak and went on talking to Major Danton—they wouldn't let me have a word with the poor chap, and I don't believe he knew I was there. But something Ishak said to him—Dupont told me afterwards it was too foul to repeat, but it had to do

with the girl who killed him last night—sent him clean off his head. He went for Ishak like a mad beast, bare-handed as he was; and, before they could be separated, Ishak shot him, in self-defense, he said. Danton was furious, for his orders were to bring Hoyt back alive to Algiers. But I'm not sure it wasn't the best thing that could have happened to him, poor devil. At least it was instantaneous, and God knows what his fate would have been otherwise."

Again there was a pause, but no comment came from Isma, and, hurriedly, as if he wished to get to the end of it, Arne resumed his narrative:

"There isn't much to tell of the rest of the trip, except that a few days before we reached the boundary of the ben Aissa country we were joined by a strong detachment of Saharan Camel Corps, and I never saw a finer-looking lot of men. Everything was dead easy, even when we got to the boundary, for Ishak and the six evil-faced ruffians he had with him, went ahead and snaffled all the guards in the watch towers, one by one, as we came to them—easy work when they thought they were friends. And last night he brought us into the city by the underground passage. It's a marvelous place, and I'd like to have another look at it; but the Soudanese didn't seem to care for it, or the Saharans either—said it was reeking with ghosts.

"The door at the end was barred, which Ishak hadn't expected, and it delayed us a good while, for they didn't want to raise a premature alarm by blowing it open, though the thunder was making such a racket I doubt if anyone would have heard. We got it off its hinges at last. By then it was so late I was sure you would be in your own room, so, with a dozen Soudanese and one of Ishak's curs to show the way, I bolted straight off to try and find you. But outside your door there was a great husky black—"

"Oh, David, he wasn't—killed?"

Wondering a little at her evident distress, Arne shook his head.

"No, only knocked out. Danton said there was to be no shooting until he was ready himself," he replied, smiling slightly at the remembrance of his long struggle with the

gigantic Nubian. "But it took time, and then, when I got into the room, of course you weren't there. Ishak's beauty had sneaked away in the meanwhile, and I hadn't the foggiest idea where to look for you. It was a bit difficult getting about, with the scrimmage that was going on; and the place seemed like a rabbit warren. When I ran you to earth eventually, it was just in time to see that big picture fall on your head. Danton and Dupont could have caught it if they'd had their wits about them, the fools, and I'm afraid I cursed them both pretty foully. The surgeon couldn't be found at first, so I carried you back here—I didn't want you to come to in that room—and looked after you myself until Dupont rounded him up."

Arne's look was still on his sand-clogged boots, but with the last words a change came into his quiet, even voice that brought Isma bolt upright, her hands flying to her quivering throat.

"And you've been with me—ever since?" she whispered, scarcely daring yet to believe.

"I have," he answered grimly. "After what I saw last night, I'm not trusting anybody in this place, and I'm not letting you out of my sight while we have to stay here—or anywhere else for that matter. I've got you now, safe under my hand, and I'll never let you go again. You'll marry me as soon as we get back to England."

"But do you want me—oh, David, do you really want me still?"

The anguished cry that fear of his pity forced from her sent him leaping to his feet, conscious at last that she had misunderstood the restraint he had tried so hard to maintain, that in his anxiety he had only blundered and hurt her.

In one stride he was beside her, his tired eyes blazing with the passionate love she had thought she would never see again.

"Want you? *My God!*" he breathed.

And, wrapped in his arms, the breath almost crushed out of her, she clung to him sobbing hysterically:

"I thought you didn't care any more. I thought you

only came—because you thought—you ought."

A soft laugh broke from him.

"You thought that, and you expect me to believe it?" But, as he bent his head to hers, the memory of another man's lips, of other arms that had held her in this same room, of all she felt must be told before she could yield to the kisses she was craving, seemed to rise suddenly like a barrier between them; and, jerking her head away, she shrank back, trying to fend him from her.

"No, no, you mustn't," she wailed, "not until you know."

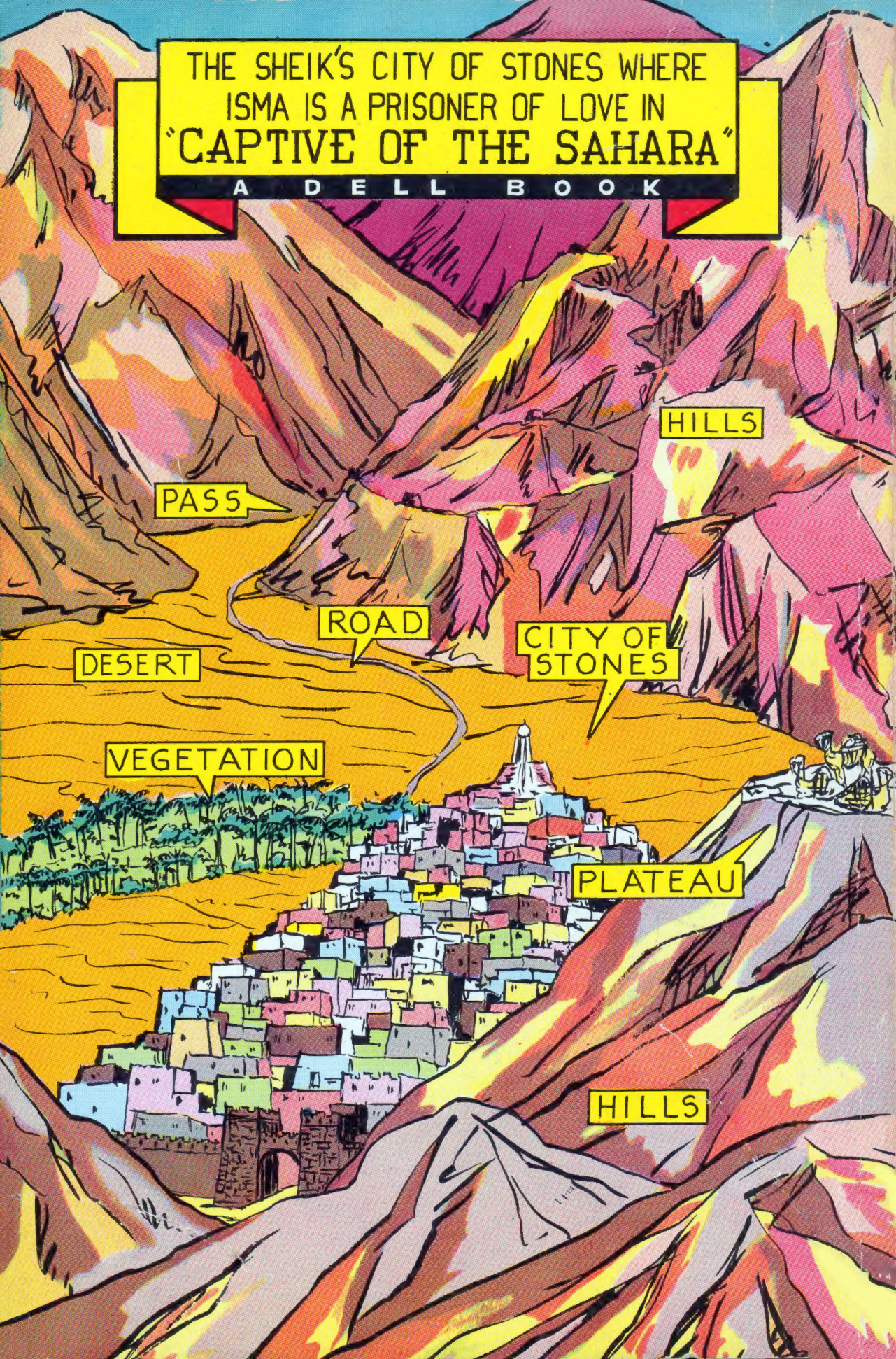
The bitter hatred and jealousy he could not forget flamed in him afresh as he looked down into her piteous eyes, but he let no sign of it escape him, and there was only infinite tenderness and understanding in the smile he gave her.

"Dear, foolish child," he said gently, "there's nothing for you to worry about, or ever will be again if I can help it. I know all I want to know, all that concerns me, I mean. I knew it this morning, long before you woke. And the rest —can be forgotten."

"But how did you—know?"

The muffled question came a few moments later from the breast of his flannel shirt, where her face lay hidden, and with another soft laugh he drew her closer.

"If you want to keep any secrets from me in the future, darling," he murmured, "you'll have to learn not to talk in your sleep."


THE SHEIK'S CITY OF STONES WHERE
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A DELL BOOK
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